

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

Issue #9 Spring 1998

**Chris
Bunch**
Shadow Warrior

**Shariann
Lewitt**

**Hal
Clement**
Oh Natural

**Allen
Steele**
Primary Ignition

**Steven
Sawicki**

**F. Alexander
Brejcha**

Pat Morrissey

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Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$

I was surprised by some of the reactions to my editorial in the Fall 1996 issue. I fearlessly proclaimed that Science Fiction is at the doorstep of a new Golden Age. Apparently a lot of people don't want go there. It seems to me that the SF field has become so stodgy that many would prefer to proclaim the death of Science Fiction year after year rather than see it thrive. I've been a reader of Science Fiction for more than twenty years, and every year I've read about the fields impending death. Isn't it about time that we face it—Science Fiction isn't about to die nor is it about to be absorbed by the mainstream, no matter how much the naysayers would like it.

Some of my excitement has been tempered by the realities of the marketplace. Magazines rely on distribution, and most distributors are not to be trusted (I haven't found an honest one yet). I've read countless editorials about the graft that is inherent in the present distribution system. I have not once seen even a single distributor try to defend themselves or make the least protestation of innocence. It's really that bad out there. Last year one wholesaler was responsible for the death of a number of genre magazines. Of the twenty or so genre magazines that were represented by this wholesaler, only *Absolute Magnitude* and *Pirate Writings* are still publishing. Fine Print has also recently gone out of business, taking any number of magazines along with it. Despite strong sales, *Absolute Magnitude* received only \$89.56 from the newsstand last year. How can this be? Well, the wholesaler never got paid by the independent distributors, we were told, and thus was unable to pay us; Fine Print filed Chapter 11 and did not have to pay us; and IPD and Ingram mysteriously had lower than expected sell throughs—great timing, that. Since both IPD and Ingram charge us handling fees for shipping *Absolute Magnitude* to the stores, most of the money made from the sales ended up in the distributors' pockets. And despite this, I still believe that we are on the verge of a new Golden Age.

By now you probably think that I'm crazy, but I'm not. We have subscribers! That's how we got through last year. As long as our subscribers continue to renew their subscriptions, we'll be around for a long time to come. Outside forces may get me a bit worked up from time to time, cause me to write a testy editorial of two, but they cannot put *Absolute Magnitude* out of business, not as long as Science Fiction readers continue to support us. If those of us who care about the Science Fiction field hold firm and do not allow outside forces or infighting to tear us apart, we will find a way into this new Golden Age. I am certain of it.

We here at *Absolute Magnitude* want to do our part to support the field. There are many worthy magazines that have not been as fortunate as we were and have not been able to attain our high profile. It is for their benefit as well as the benefit of the field that we have added a new review column by Steven Sawicki, which

Continued on page 43

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction Adventures

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Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

Spring 1998

ISSUE #9

Table of Contents

The Road to Wealth by J. I. Greco	5
Newcomer's Corner	
Monk on the Moon by Uncle River	10
Poem	
A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs by Chris Bunch	13
Bellatrix, Alnilam by Kendal Evans	24
Poem	
Another Scarlet Letter by F. Alexander Brejcha	31
Oh, Natural by Hal Clement	44
Interface Masque by Shariann Lewitt	62
Part 4 of 4	
Features:	
Primary Ignition by Allen Steele	26
Letters	29
Far Haze and Distant Thunder by Steven Sawicki	41
Book Reviews	58

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Rocket ship by Tim Ballou.



This is J. I. Greco's first professional sale

The Road to Wealth

by J. I. Greco

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The open road, our home. West on what used to be an interstate in a sixty-year old '72 Dodge Swinger, doing a hundred and ten. Dave at the wheel; me relaxed, plugged in to the car's computer, the jack cable draped down my chest, the jack plug chafing the socket behind my right ear.

"I can't believe we're driving three thousand miles through war zones and chintzy theme parks just so you can have lunch with some chick you met in VR."

"She's not a chick, Jim," Dave said. "She's a woman."

"Yeah, right. You only think she's a woman. Probably she's a sixty year old ex-con with a tattoo of downtown Baghdad on *his* back."

"You're so damn pessimistic." He gave his cigarette a final suck, burning it right to the filter, and threw it out the window. Immediately he pulled another cig out and lit it. "Besides, I know she's a female."

"And just how do you know that? All you've seen is a VR avatar."

"I know her soul. We talk, for hours and hours."

"From this side of the immersive rig, most of what you two do doesn't sound like talking."

"What can I say, we've got a very deep relationship."

"Deeply weird."

"Jealous?"

"Sickened."

The car was feeding my cranial bio-comp a host of telemetry data through the jack cable. The data was a neon overlay on my consciousness. A shiny yellow-red blip—a humanoid heat signature a mile up the road—blossomed into the foreground of my perception.

"Pedestrian up ahead," I said. "Ten bucks if you wing 'im."

"You still owe me for the last one."

"I'm good for it."

"So you say?"

Dave gunned the engine and the Swinger shot forward with a vengeance. A few seconds later we could see the ped in the flesh, walking on the side of the road, carting a tattered backpack. When he heard our engine the ped turned around and put out his thumb.

Damn surfer-hippie, he was making this too easy. I reached for my wallet to get a twenty out. But then Dave swerved around the guy at the last moment, hit the brakes, and skidded to a stop.

I was too shocked to say anything.

The shock just increased when Dave, through my window, asked the guy where he was headed.

"West," he said, cautious smile on a long, shaggy face. He pushed the brim of a dirty baseball cap with a Daktarisoft logo on it up his forehead. "You?"

"That general direction, yeah. Hop in. Put your bag in the trunk."

Dave pushed the trunk release button, and the hitchhiker went around to the back of the car. While he was out of earshot, I recovered my senses.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Giving the guy a ride."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am. You know the rules—the driver gets to choose the radio station, fiddle with the heater, and decide when and where to stop the car, and so on."

He had me there. Rules are rules. Time to appeal to his sense of logic and reason. "We don't know anything about this guy. He could be a murderer."

"Lucky thing we're both armed to the teeth, then, isn't it? And you've been scanning him the whole time. You would have mentioned if he was packing, or am I wrong?"

"He's clean, and so's his bag. But he's got a couple of implants I can't identify and two jack plugs. Why the hell does he need two? What, does he plug himself in to two systems at a time?"

"I'd be worried if he *didn't* have any implants. Besides, I've got a good feeling about him."

"Not another one of your *feelings*."

"You say that like they're bad things."

"They are, you're just not bright enough to realize it."

"You have to be more open to possibilities. You never know what the universe is going to drop in to your lap."

I was going to say something extremely hurtful yet surprisingly erudite when I heard the trunk close. A second later the hitchhiker appeared outside my door. "Hi."

I wasn't budging.

"I'm Bill," he said.

I checked my watch.

"Um, can I get in?"

Without any enthusiasm, I got out to let him climb into the back seat. When he was settled, I got back in, slamming the door shut and replugging the car in to my cranial socket.

Dave jerked the wheel hard to the left and hit the gas. We shot off, gravel, dirt and burning oil clouding behind us. Dave spoke to the image of Bill in the rear-view. "Got any drugs, Bill?"

"No, sorry."

"Want some?"

"No, thanks. Hey, I don't want to be rude, but I've been walking since Green River. I'm like exhausted. I'd just sort of like to take a nap."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry, should've realized. Make yourself comfortable."

"Thanks."

"This is insane," I growled, crunching down in my seat. I wanted a cigarette, but I'd given them up a year ago, and that only put me in a worse mood. "Freaking insane."

Dave grinned. "So, what isn't?"

Six hours later, I was driving when we got to the gas station in Stockton where Dave had arranged to hook up with Salona, his dream girl.

Absolute Magnitude

She was angelic, leaning against an old kerosene pump at the side of the station. Deep chocolate skin, radiant in the hazy noon sun. Fine bones. Short cropped hair highlighting a perfectly shaped skull. Beaming smile. Timeless fashion sense, if her jumpsuit and scarf ensemble wasn't a fluke.

All in all, one of the prettiest nine-year old girls I'd ever seen.

"My god," Dave said, his cigarette dropping into his lap. "She's a kid."

"Looks that way."

"Quick—I don't think she's seen us. Turn the car around and floor it."

"No way, buddy," I said, smiling for the first time since this little road trip started. "I live to see you mortally embarrassed, and this promises to be the big one."

"I hate you. Really."

"I know. And your jeans are on fire."

He yelped and started patting his lap.

In the back, Bill was waking up. "We're stopping? What's going on?"

"Make yourself presentable. We're gon'na meet Dave's significant other."

During the car ride to a sushi and waffle joint, Dave and Salona—that was the kid's name—didn't say much to each other. I figured it was just the expected uncasiness of a first meeting in the flesh, which the surprise age difference wasn't helping. But it was more than that: Dave was in a true funk. I could see it in the way he held himself as he drove, in the shortness of his answers to the small talk I was trying to keep alive, in his avoiding eye contact with the kid. Why, I couldn't put a finger on.

At the restaurant, Dave wasn't any more lively. In fact, his funk was evolving in to a seething. It was all I could do to keep the conversation light. Of course, that responsibility didn't keep me from asking how she'd managed to make Dave think she was ten-years older than her actual nine-years.

"I used an AI agent to up my vocab, use bigger words, ya know?" Salona said, swishing a straw in her Coke. "I thought you were closer to my age—but you were probably using an agent to dumb yourself down, right?"

I had to bite my inner cheek to keep from chuckling. Dave shrugged non-committally, then drew deep on his cig. "So what else were you lying about?"

"Davey, I wasn't really lying. It was more like playing, okay? Please don't be hurt."

She paused for him to say something, anything, but he only exhaled and stared into his coffee.

"Except for the age thing, everything I told you was true. I do have two moms, I'm into Burroughs and Lucas and Neo-Paganism. I love walking on the beach even when it's nasty out and I have to wear a tox suit. That was all real."

"You have two moms?" Bill asked. He'd been silent so far, slowly and precisely eating his lunch of eggs and bacon-flavored tofu, which

he'd paid for in advance with ten-dollar coins. "Biological? Or just the old divorce and remarriage game?"

"Biological."

"Which one carried you?"

"Neither of them wanted the hassle. They rented a surrogate."

"Human?"

"Goat."

"Urrm," Bill mumbled, then went back to his food.

Dave looked up from his coffee. "Speaking of sex..."

"We're we?" I asked, desperately wanting to avoid the topic.

Salona didn't take the opportunity to change the subject. "Oh, that." She sounded awfully blasé for a nine year old. "We never actually had sex, Dave."

"I was there, remember?"

"You may have been—but I wasn't. Whenever things started to get icky I let Barbarella take over."

"Barbarella?"

"That's what I call it."

"Another agent?"

"Yeah."

"You sure got a lot of agents."

"Got a friend who sends me Iranian pirate-ware."

"So, we never had sex?"

"That's what I said."

"Well." After a long pause, he asked, "Can I get a copy of Barbarella?"

"If you want."

Dave ground his cigarette out in the disposable paper ashtray. His normal goofy smile returned, and the cloud of tension lifted from our table. "Cool."

Salona seemed relieved. "Cool."

Bill picked that moment to finish his lunch and excuse himself. He headed for the bathroom.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Salona leaned forward conspiratorially. "So, where'd you pick him up?"

"Outside of Salt Lake," Dave said. "This morning. He's kind of weird, but harmless enough."

"You mean you don't know who he is?"

I scratched my left ear. "Should we?"

"It's all over the grid. Don't you guys ever plug in to CNNet?"

"We make news, we don't watch it," Dave said. "Anyway, you want to let us in on the story?"

"You heard of Daktarisoft? Your hitchhiker friend is the CEO."

"Don't take this the wrong way," I said, "but when I was your age, I thought my neighbor was Jim Carrey. He wasn't—he was just some old weird guy who liked to dress up in leotards and do bad Jerry Lewis shtick. Maybe Bill just looks like this CEO guy."

"This isn't my imagination," Salona shook her head. "That's him."

"Okay, what if he is? So he likes to hitchhike. Big deal. Interesting coincidence we picked him up. That's all."

Salona sighed. "He wasn't on the nets because he likes to hitchhike. He was on the nets because he's gone AWOL."

"He walked away from Daktarisoft?"

"Yep. And Daktarisoft wants him back. He's more than their CEO, he's their main brain. He's coded about every piece of software



Road to Wealth

they've got on the market. Go on, ask me how bad they want him back."

Dave took the bait. "How bad they want him back?"

"Real bad. Thirty million bad."

"That's bad," I said, after a whistle.

"Buy a lot of gum," Salona said.

Suddenly I understood why Dave felt such a connection with the girl. "Yes, it would."

Across the restaurant, Bill came out of the men's room. The three of us smiled at each other. A lot of gum, indeed.

On the pretense of giving Salona a ride home, the four of us piled into the Dodge after lunch. Dave and Salona up front, chatting and laughing like old friends, Dave driving, Salona giving directions.

I was in the back with Bill. He didn't have a clue. I pointed out a midget walking along the sidewalk. He turned to gawk, and that's when I shoved the magnetosphere stick against his temple and hit the power stud. He convulsed, once, then his eyes glazed, his teeth crackled, and his body went slack.

Dave stopped the car and went to get a straight-jacket from the trunk.

I turned to Salona. "Where can we drop you off?"

"No way. It was my idea," she said. "I'm going with you."

"We'll send you your share."

"Right. Dave I trust. You, not."

"I'm hurt."

"Like I care. I'm going."

I sneered. "I could just throw you out, you know. Pavement hurts."

She sneered back. "And I could call the local panther militia and tell them you had your way with me. White boy like you attacking little old me, I'm sure they'd be eager to speak with you."

I caved. "Fine, but you're pitching in for gas."

After we swung by Salona's to let her grab an overnight bag—understanding moms she had, not even asking why or where she was going with two blatantly disreputable slacker mercenaries and a surfer in a straight jacket. We hit the highway in the general direction of Boise and Daktarisoft corporatti headquarters.

Dave was teaching Salona how to drive. That was over my objections, but it was something Salona's mothers never let her do, and she managed to needle Dave in to it. Like most nine-year olds she was a pro at getting what she wanted.

In the backseat, I was accessing the Net with the cell modem in my second right floating rib. I didn't feel like having the phone book inside my head so I went flat-screen, piping the directory to the one-inch display on my left palm. I fingered through the listings, looking for a number at the software giant that would get me a human.

"You can't do this," Bill said, watching me look up the number. "It's not right."

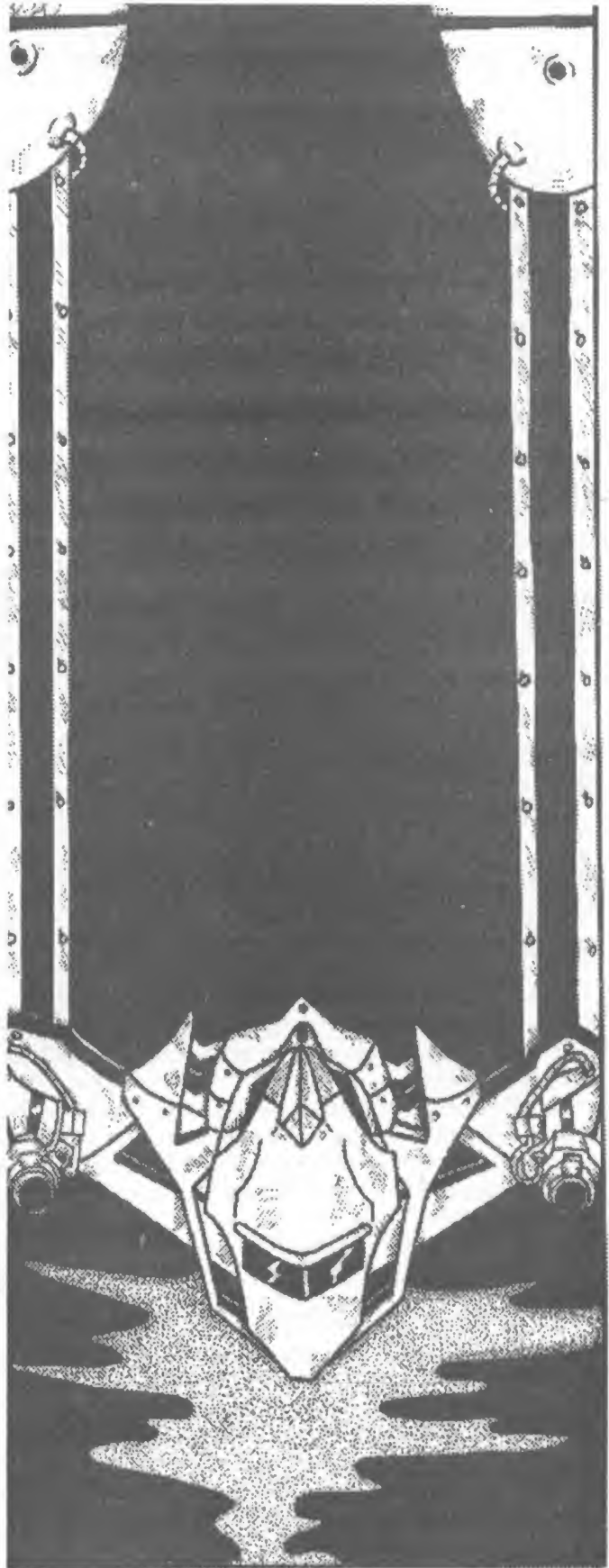
"No, it ain't, strictly speaking. Then again, it's profitable."

"Great attitude. Hope you've got a lot of positive karma stored up."

"Hey, I'm just trying to make a living. But I'm not entirely inhuman. The market price of your head is thirty mil. I'm open to counter offers."

"I can't offer anything like that."

"For a guy who owns one of the biggest corporattis on the planet, you're displaying an alarming lack of negotiating skills. The word 'haggle' mean anything to you?"



Absolute Magnitude

"I quit my corp, remember? And the corp controls all my assets. I could write you a check, but I don't think the bank would honor it."

"Well, then, I have to tell you, I don't see much of a reason to let you go."

"You know what the corp makes me do?"

"Attend board meetings? Schmooze with politicians at thousand-dollar a plate orgies? Ooh, must be a rough life."

"They make me code."

"Excuse me? I thought that's what a coder does."

"They make me code word processors. And spreadsheets. And home and small business finance AI's. You can't grok how boring that is."

"That's your whole gripe?"

"Man, you know how long it's been since they let me code a game?"

"Games?"

"The last one I did was three years ago," he said, a wistful look passing over his face. "*Gun Point: Ultra Wombat*. A real beauty. The code sang."

"You did that one?"

He smiled, a proud father.

"Christ that game sucked." I punched the main Daktarisoft Public Relations number. "Fucker kept killing me on level seven. Negotiations over. You're going back."

“Stop hitting me,” Bill yelled.
The back seat had been a den of whispered harsh words and restless road-borne hijinks for two hours. Both Salona and Bill were acting like children. Now things were getting physical. That was the last straw. I was officially annoyed.

I whipped around in the passenger seat. Salona was in the process of slamming her fist into Bill's shoulder, but pulled the punch when she saw me glaring at her.

She looked at me innocently. "Hi."

"She was hitting me." Bill wriggled in the straight jacket. "Make her stop hitting me."

"He was on my side," she said, defiant.

"I was not," Bill whined.

"Bill," I growled, "you've got an i.q. that's easily better than ninety-nine percent of the people on the planet. So you think you can stop acting like a frigging spoiled brat?"

I turned towards Salona, pointed my finger at her. "And you—the second we give genius there back to his corporation we become richer than God. You'll have so much money you'll be able to hire someone to go through puberty for you. So sit back, shut up, and don't make me come back there."

Salona threw her arms over her chest and a pout onto her face. But she didn't say anything. Even nine year olds respect the power of imminent wealth.

After two days non-stop on the road, the four of us cramped in the two-door Swinger, the nerves of everyone in the car were understandably shaky at best. Even Dave, who'd had his stomach chem factory pumping THC straight into his bloodstream, was showing the strain by continually humming the first three bars of Mussorgsky's *Dance of the Persian Slaves* just loud enough to drown out the sound of the engine, the wind crashing through the open windows, and my own thoughts.

Good thing the end of our journey was near, 'cause I was about to take my Walther out of its ankle holster and put a bullet into his throat.

One more hill to climb and we'd be at the delivery site.

"Oh, that's interesting," I said. Over the crest of the hill the car's telemetry picked up a heat signature. That signature blossomed into a dozen as we got closer to the crest. Right at the crest the dozen became hundreds, filling the HUD in my head with little red and pink dots.

Dave mercifully stopped humming. "What's interesting?"

"Looks like a crowd up ahead, over the hill, blocking the road most likely."

"Daktarisoft?"

"Since when does a corp send a thousand people to do the job of two stretch limos and an escort tank?"

"Point." Dave reached between his legs and pulled the lever under the driver's seat to arm the Swinger's defense systems. From inside the trunk came the ratcheting of the anti-missile missiles coming on-line. The dirty-beige paint on the skin of the car shifted into a darker brown as nanobots were released and weaved themselves into a coating of armor.

"More weirdness," I announced. "There's an infrared and electro-magnet hole in the middle of the crowd."

"A hole?"

"About 15 meters in diameter, spherical. Hiding something from telemetry."

"I wonder what."

We crested the hill and Dave's question was answered.

A thousand or so people, some brandishing small arms, some with clubs and pointed sticks, others with exoskeleton VR rigs and notebooks, stood in a loose throng at the bottom of the hill. Sure enough, they were blocking the road. But not entirely by themselves.

Standing dead in the center of the road was a three-legged metal beast, an autonomous tank robo. But this was no regular military model. This one looked like it was built from spare parts in a garage in the suburbs. Two of its legs were thick, double jointed, rusty, while the third, shiny red and new, had a single joint and a cluster of hydraulic-pump digits as a foot. A dozen stalks came off its torso, tipped with lasers, rail cannons, claws, and something that looked like an oversized egg-beater. Topping the torso was a true relic, the refurbished turret of a World War II Soviet T-34. I had a solid hunch the big gun still worked.

Dave hit the breaks, hard.

In the backseat, Bill laughed. "Neat. My fan club's here."

"Fan club?"

"I'm very popular with the gearhead and hacker crowd."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"How'd they know where the delivery was going down?" Salona asked. Suspicious eyes went from Dave, to me, to Bill, then back to me.

"You used a cell phone to call Daktarisoft," Bill said.

I nodded. "Yeah, so?"

"The encryption on your average cell phone ain't exactly military grade. Cracking it's a party trick."

"Oh, just fucking great." I took the magnetosphere stick out of the glove compartment and tossed it to Salona. "Buzz him."

"This is for hogging my side, asshole." She jammed the stick into his ear. When he was unconscious, she asked, "Now what?"

Outside, the robo tank swiveled its main gun towards us. "They're bluffing," Dave said. "No way they'd hurt their hero."

Road to Wealth

I shook my head. "Unless they figure Billy-boy's the kind of guy who'd rather die than be forced to write boring code."

"Point?"

While Dave nervously gripped and released the steering wheel, the car's telemetry shot my bio-comp a flash-red warning. "Damn, damn, damn, damn. Sucker just image and radar locked us. I think it's gon'na fire."

The crowd started moving towards us. We had enough ammo aboard to discourage them, but if the tank started lobbing lead, that wouldn't matter.

Sizing up the tactical possibilities of the situation as they were recited in order of odds by my bio-comp wasn't encouraging. A short list with long odds.

And then the odds changed.

At first they were only blips on the radar, but at the speed they were moving they were soon visible. There were a half-dozen of them, roaring from the north, flattened ovals of reflective blue plastisteel. Copters. Corporate gun-ship copters.

I wasn't the only one who spotted the copters. In a gentle, almost casual movement, the robo tank rotated its torso around to point the stalk with the egg-beater at the lead copter. The beater glowed red briefly and a second later the copter dropped out of the sky, no outward sign of what caused it to do so. At least that told me what the egg-beater was: HERF, High-Energy Radio Frequency projector. Glad it had been aimed at the copter and not us—it would have melted all the electronics in the car, including the ones in my skull.

The copter force reacted to the downing of their comrade by splitting into two groups, the last in each group loosing a volley of air-to-surface missiles as they peeled by. Two of the missiles hit the tank—one in the turret, the other in the shiny red leg—while the others detonated in the air, fanning shrapnel over the crowd below.

The tank staggered. The crowd got pissed-off. En masse they started firing—mostly ineffectually—at the copters with rifles and pistols. The copters were swinging around for another go, and the hackers got smart. A couple of them brought out bazookas and shoulder-mounted rocket launchers.

Things were going to get real messy.

"Now would be a good time to turn the car around, Dave."

"Yeah, yeah, on it." Dave threw the Dodge into a sharp reverse turn. A second later we were screaming back over the hill and away from the battlefield. To be on the safe side, I had the car drop a half-dozen spike-mines behind us.

Salona leaned forward against the back of the front seat. "Why are we leaving?"

I huffed. "You notice the war going on back there?"

"What about our money?"

"It's too hot right now. We'll call Daktarisoft once we get clear and arrange another exchange. Don't worry—I'm not about to give up on this yet."

"What if Daktarisoft gets spooked? Davey," she said, "you going to let him screw this up for us?"

"Sal," Dave said, shrugging, "give it a rest."

At that she flung herself back and launched in to a full-tilt pout.

Ten miles down the road, a copter overshot us. It landed with deliberate slowness on the road ahead. It was one of the corporate copters from the battle, and probably friendly, but I wasn't taking any chances. I had the car target it and kept my finger over the fire icon on my palm display.

Dave cautiously slowed the car to a stop as a woman in a standard-issue blue business suit stepped out of the copter. She waived at us, a platinum debit card in her hand.

"You can knock off the pout, Salona," I said, getting out of the car. "We're about to become rich."

After the exchange, we found a hotel, then went to celebrate the healthy thirty million deposit in our bank account. Salona decided to stay behind and get some sleep. Nine-year olds have no stamina.

Sometime after three a.m., in a biker bar in the bombed-out remains of downtown Boise, surrounded by hundreds of newly acquired friends, me and Dave were celebrating, big time. When my bio-comp told me our business account had been accessed, I didn't think anything of it. One, I

was way drunk. And two, I figured it was just the waitress deducting the latest round of drinks we'd bought for the crowd. We'd been doing a lot of buying. Perfectly innocent access.

Fuck was I wrong.

We stumbled back to the hotel around seven in the morning.

The room was empty. The beds hadn't been slept in. The portable cot hadn't been unfolded. The protective paper coverings were still on the glasses and ice bucket.

And no Salona.

My stomach sank.

While Dave went into the bathroom to throw up, I accessed our business account. It was almost empty. A couple a hundred where twelve hours before had been thirty million.

I went in to the bathroom. Dave on his knees. Hugging porcelain and taking drags off a cigarette between heavens.

"She took the money, Dave."

He looked up from the bowl. "Our money?"

"Yep."

"All of it?"

"Yep."

"Pisser."

"Yep."

He heaved again. When he was done, he sat down on the bathroom floor. "How?" he asked.

I couldn't look at him. "I gave her the access code to the account, in case she wanted room service."

"That was a mistake." His face went soft for a second. That usually indicated his stomach was flooding his system with a ton of sundry chemicals. This time, pain-killers and valium, I guessed. "Shit, Jim, she's my friend and I wouldn't have trusted her with the damn code. Why the hell did you?"

"She's just a kid. Who'd thought?"

"You would have if you had a little more empathy."

"It's not a skill I've particularly missed."



"Until now."

"Yep." I sighed. "Until now."

"So," David said, balling a few feet of toilette paper to wipe his mouth and chin, "you ready to go?"

"After her?"

"Shit yeah."

"Ain't exactly gon'na be easy, buddy. It's been hours. Our money could have bought her a ticket anywhere by now. Even off-world."

"No worries, Jimbo. We have this." He reached in to his jacket. I figured he was going for another cig. Instead he pulled out a small, flat oval of composite plastic and held it up for me to admire. "We get within range of the little traitor and this thing'll beep."

"Beep?"

"Well, more of a ding, ding, ding, but I think you can grok the paradigm, right?"

"My opinion of your abilities just went up ten points. When'd you manage to slip a tracker on her?"

"That first lunch. Spritzed a couple cee-cee's of saline suspension full of nanotrackers into her soda."

"Vishnu's nipples," I said, smiling proudly, "you're one paranoid fucker."

"Thank you."

"So, what's that gadget's range? How close do we have to be before it starts to go ding?"

"That's not an easy question to answer. I mean, you've got to calculate the density of a human body, the battery strength of the transmitters on the nanotrackers, ambient atmospheric conditions, phase of the moon." He shrugged, looked at his feet. "But all things being equal, about two hundred meters."

"Two hundred meters? That ain't exactly a real long distance—I've spit farther than that."

"You have to understand they're very tiny nanotrackers. Teeny."

"All of a sudden my opinion of you plummets once again to negative territory."

"Hey, it's better than nothing."

"A teeny bit better." I put my hand out. He grabbed it and I helped him pull himself to his feet. "You know, even with that tracker, we could end up spending the rest of our lives chasing after Salona. Even for thirty million, that's not exactly the way I had my future mapped out."

He led the way out of the bathroom. "Make you a deal. We hunt her for three months. If we don't find the little backstabber, we sell the tracker. I bet someone would be intersted in it."

"Deal." I glanced around the room. Checked to make sure we weren't leaving anything behind and whether there was anything in the place worth stealing. We weren't and there wasn't. Wasn't even anything worth vandalizing. "Maybe we can break even on this after all."

"We should at least get enough to upgrade my VR gear. The new Hitachis look interesting. Barbarella should really kick in one of their model seventeens, assuming I can track down a copy of her."

"I thought Salona was supposed to give you one."

"It surprises you she didn't? The little lying, thieving, manipulative..."

I huffed. "Our kind of people, all things considered."

At the hotel door, he spun around and shot me a hard glare. Then he grinned. "Yep."

I opened the door. It was way too bright outside. Amazing what sunshine can do for a hangover. I felt like dying. But it did put me in the mood for a chase.



Monk on the Moon

by Uncle River

"Heroic tolerance for sensory deprivation,"
Transmitted a journalist's froth to my screen.
I shook my head; no one saw me.
Fourteen . . . no, seventeen years ago now:
With no atmosphere, Time neither soars nor drags,
But fractures in frozen lunar night and
Sublimates by day. Humility, you say, or pride,
Keeps me from your celebration of the
Opening of the first bar on the Moon?
Hardly! It's the voracious noise, to
Stir and confuse primordial stillness. I came
For the quiet—no deprivation to my senses
Awed across fragments of forever. Please
Understand: I do not disdain your bar, your
Luna City to be. Maybe I even will
Come to your celebration, pretend my tears are
Joy at human community on the Moon. I do
Wish you well. But it was always the
Silence that fed my soul . . . I wonder, am
I really to old for Titan . . . ?



SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER

Janet Fox

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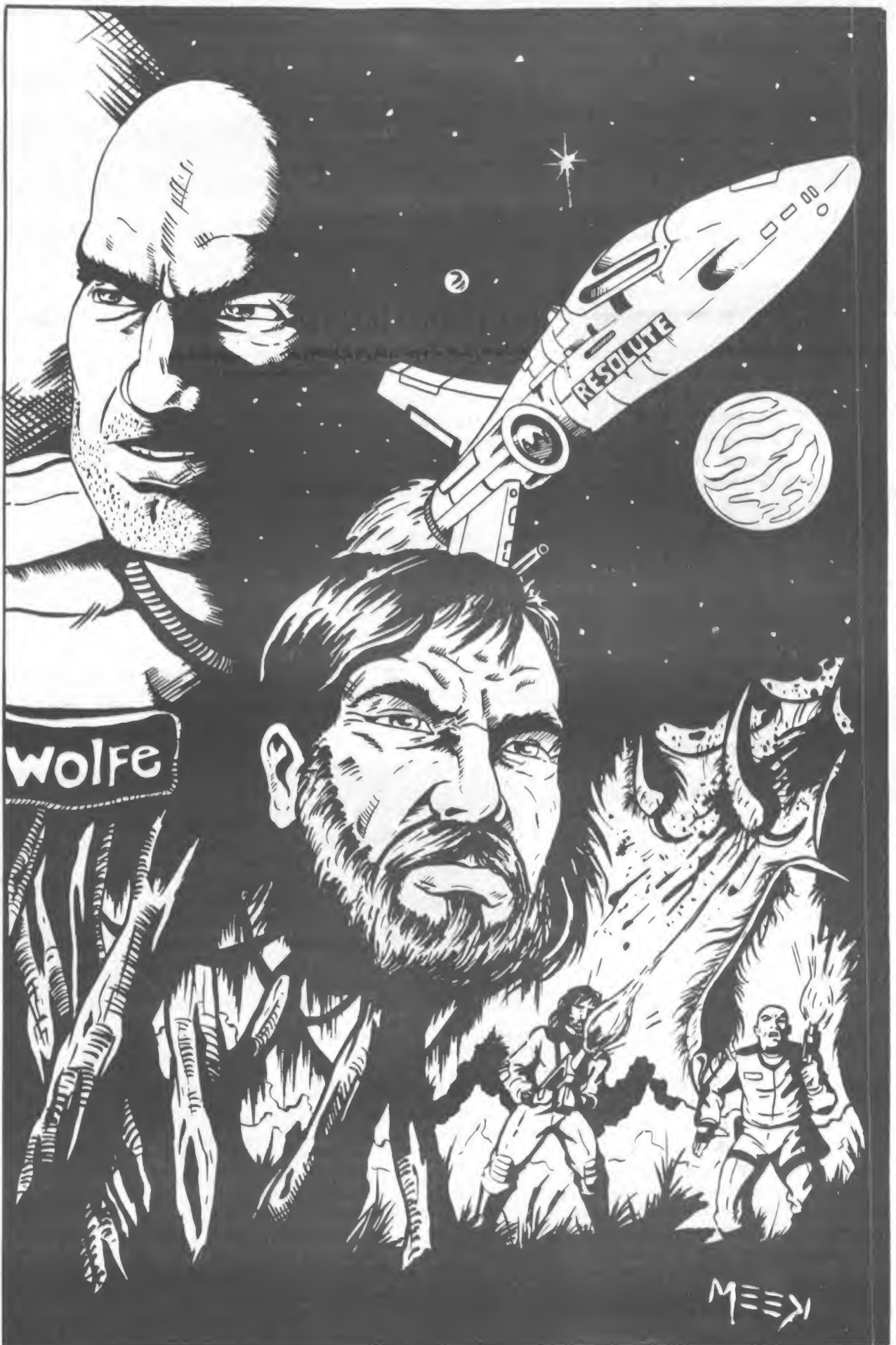
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Chris Bunch is best known as the author of the highly successful novel *Seer King* and for the *Shadow Warrior* novels. He was also the co-author of the *Sten* novels and of the *Anteros Trilogy*. He lives in the smallest town in the known universe, with his best friend Karen. You can expect the sequel to *Seer King* in the near future.

A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs

A Shadow Warrior Tale

by Chris Bunch

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This is an excerpt from The Darkness of God, the third and final volume in the Shadow Warrior series.

Joshua Wolfe, bounty hunter and Federation renegade, has regained the Ur-Lumina, the huge crystalline weapon of the vanished alien Al'ar race, which he needs for his own—and humanity's—purposes. He is near-broke, and stranded on the mining world of Ak-Mechat VI when the story opens.

"You've been out of touch for awhile," the distorted voice said from half a galaxy distant.

"Been busy."

"So I gather," the voice said. "Don't know if I should be talking to you."

"Oh?"

There was nothing but star-hum for a bit.

"All right," the voice said reluctantly. "I didn't get where I am by picking sides. Federation Intelligence would like to talk to you, real bad. And I don't mean with you as a free agent."

"That's a known."

"Did you know they've put the word out that anybody who grabs you and delivers you to Cisco or one of his bottom-feeders will get absolution? Alive only, which I suppose is a blessing."

"I didn't. Am I hot publicly?"

"Not yet. But sooner or later some bravo'll open his mouth to the law."

"Of course. You thinking about collecting?"

There was a blurt of static.

"Come on, Wolfe. I've seen what happens when somebody decides to pin your hide to the wall. I'm not an operator any more, either. I just sit here and put people in touch with people they'd like to do business with."

"Good," Wolfe said. "I don't like dealing with ambitious folks."

"What do you need?" the voice asked. "And what's in it for me?"

"I need a ship. Clean, fast, armed if possible."

"How much you willing to pay?"

"Once I've got the ship... whatever the price tag is."

"Once you've got the ship... come on, Wolfe. Once I've won the Federation Lottery I can afford to buy a ticket. Ships are expensive."

"They didn't used to be."

"You didn't used to be Federation Intelligence's poster boy, either."

"All right," Wolfe gruded. "I'll hunt elsewhere."

"No," the voice said. "I didn't say I couldn't get you one. But since it doesn't sound like you're sitting on barrels of credits right now, we'll have to find another way of payment."

"That's what I told somebody not too long ago," Wolfe said. "So what's the tag?"

"Now we're doing business," the voice said. "Let me consider a couple offers I've got lying around."

The voice went away, came back after awhile.

"There's this official on a certain world who seems to think he's a minor deity. Some people I know would like him to discover the joys of disembodiment and see what he's like in a new incarnation."

Wolfe took a deep breath.

"I don't have much choice."

"Good. This one won't be... wait a second. Cancel the above, my friend. I've got something a whole lot better. And it won't mess with any morals you have left. The bodies shouldn't start bouncing until you're well out of town."

"What is it?"

"Very simple. I've got a package... or rather some people I know have a package. They want it delivered to some people on another world."

"What's the catch? Seems there's always enough hotrods around for courier runs," Wolfe said.

"The package itself is hot... in both old-fashioned senses of the word. And the ship-driver I'm going to use I have... some small questions about. He may or may not have done me wrong a couple of years ago, so I want somebody I can trust with him."

"Oh yeah. The people it's going to are also warmish."

"Break it down, man."

"Fine. I've got 25 pounds of fissionable material somebody on World A wants taken back to his, her or their Old Sentimental Home, so a group of people who call themselves Fighters For Victory can build a little bitty bomb."

Star-hum.

"You interested?"

"I'll do it."

"Good man. I assume you'll have some specifications about being picked up, wherever you are, since you never were a trusting soul."

"I will."

"Nice to be partners again, Joshua."

Absolute Magnitude

A ship lay in the center of the empty port. It was sleek, angled, dull black. Two gunports were open, chaingun barrels in battery.

One tracked Joshua's gravsled as it floated across the field. He drove the moke to the shed and put it inside. He came out, carrying the two packs Kristin had bought for him.

The port slid open, and a bearded, big man came out. He held a gun pointed down at the ground, carefully not aiming at Joshua.

"You're Wolfe," he said. "I recognize you from the holos back during the war. I'm Merrett Chesney."

"I've heard of you."

"You're a little late."

"Some unexpected business came up."

"We better bust ass. The client's in a hurry."

"So am I," Wolfe said.

66 You travel light," Chesney said. "A virtue in these times."

"It didn't start out that way," Joshua said, then forced his mind away from Ak-Mechat VI.

"When does it ever?" Chesney said, and laughed harshly. He checked the control panel, nodded satisfaction, swiveled in his chair.

"I think the closest I ever came to actually meeting you was off some beastly Al'ar planet. A1122-3 it was. Horrid tropical world. I was beating up the oppos to give one of your teams cover on an insert."

Wolfe thought back.

"You were trying a prisoner recovery," Chesney said.

Wolfe remembered.

"It got a little ugly," Chesney went on. "I had seven old *Albamarle*-class spit-kits, and we were zooming and shooting and dancing all over the heavens and then two Al'ar frigates came out of nowhere.

"We lost three, and were very damned grateful that was the worst it got."

"It wasn't any prettier on the ground," Wolfe said.

"I never heard what happened, actually," Chesney went on. "Never had the proper clearance. No one around to be rescued, then?"

"No," Wolfe said slowly. "No, there were almost 70 civilians down there." He remembered the stumbling, nearly brain-dead men and women who'd been through Al'ar interrogation.

Chesney waited for more details, eyes gleaming a little. After awhile, he realized that was all Wolfe proposed to say.

"Ah well, ah well," he said. "A long time ago, wasn't it? But back then we were most alive, at our finest. Pity those days aren't still around, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," Wolfe said. "We're still paying, and I don't think the debt'll be settled by the time I die."

Chesney shrugged. "War debts, deficits...those are for governments to worry about, not warriors like you and I."

"I wasn't talking about the money," Joshua said shortly.

Chesney looked at him cautiously. "Well, that's as may be." He paused, then changed the subject: "I s'pose one thing we should settle is the pecking order, then. It's my ship, so I'm in command normally. However, I'm hardly a fool. When we insert and extract, your areas of expertise, I'm demoted to first mate. Agreed?"

"That sounds reasonable."



"Good," Chesney said. "Very good indeed. I happen to have a small bottle of a good, perhaps excellent if my shipper is telling the truth, Earth Bordeaux.

"Shall we seal our partnership?"

Chesney was as experienced as Joshua in long, dull N-space passages, and so the two stayed out of each other's way as much as possible. The ship was small, a converted 8-crew long range scout of the *Chambers*-class, which Chesney had named the *Resolute*. The engine spaces had been roboticized, as Wolfe had done with his own ship, the *Grayle*.

The crew spaces were still anodized in the soft pastels the Federation thought lessened tension, and Wolfe supposed Chesney preferred them that way, reminding him of his service days.

Something nagged at Wolfe, something about Chesney. But it didn't surface, and so he let his backbrain worry at it.

He spent the long hours working with the Lumina in his carefully-locked compartment, reading from the ship's library, which was extensive, or sleeping. He took over the cooking, since Chesney's idea of a good meal was to reconstitute a steak, fry it gray, and cover it with freeze-dried mushrooms and whatever soup came to hand.

Chesney had hidden a bug inside the wardrobe catch, which Wolfe found and deactivated within an hour after jumping from Ak-Mechat VI. Neither man brought it up.

Wolfe discovered Chesney had more than one good, perhaps excellent, bottle of wine aboard. He nipped constantly, on the sly, an experienced secret toper. Joshua wondered if he was as sly about his alcoholism when alone. Since they were far from action, and a

A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs

Chambers-class ship in transit could be piloted by a drug-hazed gibbon, Wolfe said nothing.

Four ship-days out, Chesney told Wolfe the destination and the clients.

They were to pick up the bomb materials on Bulnes IV, then make a short jump to deliver it to the rebels on Osirio, barely 12 light-years distant.

"Seems straightforward enough," he said. "Don't suppose, Joshua, you'd be willing to dig through the library, see what the piddling match is all about, though?"

"Not that it matters, but it might be interesting. Even valuable, if the slok comes down."

Wolfe obeyed, also curious, and reported some success.

"I suppose it's some government-take-all planet with a colony, dissidents dissenting from the official policy, helping rebels and that, then?" Chesney said. He'd been quick to inform Wolfe that not only did he despise politics, but utterly hated any government that did more than maintain a military and police force.

"Not exactly. The whole situation's interestingly backward. Better listen closely," Joshua said, "because I don't think I'll get it right more than once. Osirio, where we're to make delivery of the package, was the mother planet. Evidently their best and brightest went out to Bulnes, where we're supposed to make the pickup, and colonized the system.

"Osirio was brain-drained, and is currently in a state of what the 'pedia called decadent autocracy. Aristocratic thugs who run things badly, much like Earth's Czars, so there's an active little rebellion bubbling. Assassinations, no-go districts, the stray conventional bombing here and there. The rebels, as far as I could tell, don't have any particular program other than blasting the rascals out.

"The real dynamism is on Bulnes IV, but the government of Bulnes owes its legitimacy to the mother planet."

"Good lord," Chesney said.

"Yeah. They're afraid if Osirio falls, they'll tumble right after it."

"Who's right?"

Wolfe shrugged. "The people out of power aren't killing as many people as those in power. Yet. Maybe they'd do better, maybe they'd start their own pogroms if they won."

"Thank Heaven it's not for us to say," Chesney said. "But with a mess like that, it's certainly tempting to make the easy profit."

"I don't follow," Wolfe said.

"The way that wonderful voice we contract our services through set the deal is we get 250K when we pick up the plutonium, or whatever it is, 750 on delivery."

"I know."

"We could do a little personal renegotiation, arrange to get the 750 from the rebels first, then write off the 250 and go about our merry way, then, couldn't we?" Chesney saw the expression on Wolfe's face. "No, I s'pose not. Probably be too messy to arrange, not to mention dangerous while we loop around their silly world, bickering.

"We'll play the cards as they lay, I suppose."

They came out of N-space on the fringes of the Bulnes system, and wormed their way toward the fourth planet. There were three planetary fortresses orbiting the planet, and patrol ships crisscrossing the world.

"Piffle," Chesney said. "Their security chatters like a band of langurs, never keeping silent to see what's going on around it. This shall be as easy as stealing coins from a dead man's eyes. Their search patterns are lattices like your grandmother's pie."

"I don't think my grandmother made pies," Wolfe said. "I remember her being quite busy representing her district."

"All right, then your first popsy's see-everything blouse."

"I wasn't that lucky," Wolfe said amiably. "My first love was the daughter of the Federation's secretary of state. She wore tunics that fastened at the neck, hung loosely and never gave me anything to dream about, plus the baggy knee-trousers that were the style then."

"Ah, but once you got the tunic off," Chesney said, deliberately lascivious, "then beheld a garden of delights?"

"Nope," Joshua answered. "I never even kissed her, and I'm not sure she knew I did more than exist. In any event, it was more pouting than passion on my part."

"Ah," Chesney said. "Unlucky you. As for me, my first was the tutor my father brought in to teach my brothers some language or other. A definite tart. But when my father caught us doing the naughty, that was the last we saw of her. I've often wondered..." Chesney shook his head.

"What happened to your great first love?" he went on, changing the subject, making conversation while his fingers touched sensors, and the *Resolute* closed on Bulnes IV.

"She went away to school, married the graduating valedictorian when she was a freshman. Perhaps a successful marriage was what she intended for a career. They both were killed in the Al'ar raid on Mars." Joshua remembered the girl's easy smile, seldom directed at him.

"Just as well... that she married someone else, I mean," Chesney said. "A warrior doesn't need any more anchors than his own mind can provide."

"Yeah," Wolfe said sarcastically. "That's us. Footloose, carefree rebels, leaving a trail of broken hearts as we wander the stars."

Wolfe came out of his compartment yawning. Chesney was at the control panel, on the com. He saw Wolfe, said "Received... clear..." into the mike, broke contact.

"You've got contact with our customers?" Wolfe asked.

"Right. First an hour or two ago, then they put out another signal just now," Chesney said quickly. "Damned amateur worrywarts. Babbling like they've never heard of intercepts or locators. Had to cut them off, as you heard."

"The only way conspirators get experience is the hard way," Joshua said, easing into the co-pilot's seat. "Unfortunately, most get dead in the learning."

"And isn't that the truth," Chesney said heartily. "They even had a password for us. Freedom Or Death. How terribly jejune.

"We're about sixteen hours from planetfall, by the way.

"How about some coffee?"

"Sure," Wolfe said, getting up. "Have it ready in a minute."

"Keep one hand for yourself," Chesney warned. "I might be jinking us around a trifle. There might be a det-bubble or two I've missed."

Absolute Magnitude

66 **I**nteresting place to schedule a pickup for," Wolfe said. "Right in the middle of university grounds. Very clever, unless they're professorial, in which case it's suicidal."

"Which way would you bet?"

"Six to five. Against. On anything."

"That's safe," Chesney said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm about to be somewhat busy."

Chesney brought the *Resolute* screaming in from space, just at dawn.

"Hopefully they'll think we're a meteorite for a moment or two, and by then we'll be below their radar horizon and invisible long enough to grab the geetus," he said. "Buckle up."

He flared the ship barely a thousand feet up, and Wolfe heard antigrav generators groan, and saw red WARNING flash on the control panel.

"Shut up," Chesney grunted to the blinking lights. "Stop sniveling, you bitch." His fingers danced across sensors, and Wolfe remembered a pianist he'd seen.

Chesney was very good, he decided, as the ship spun, dodged, without, as far as Joshua could see, any warnings of detection.

"Always well," Chesney grunted, "to be careful. Touchdown, six minutes..."

There was a city below. He extruded spoilers, killed the drive.

"Don't want to go *too* slow," he said. "Or some traffic cop'll throw a rock and knock us down. One minute sixteen. Here we are."

He put reverse thrust on as the *Resolute* shot over long rows of housing into open country, then towers and great buildings were ahead, gold and red brick in the dawn's light.

"And here we be," he said, braking sharply, and the *Resolute* bucked, fell a few feet and Chesney moved the slide-pots of the anti-grav system up, and the ship stabilized. "Just on time."

The *Resolute* settled toward a huge cement pad, marked with regular lines. Beyond was a large stadium. The *Resolute* touched down with never a jar.

"I'll keep it just grounded, so we don't punch a nice easy-to-spot ship-sized crater in their parking lot," Chesney said. "Perhaps you'll see to the niceties, then? Do take a gun. Freedom-lovers can prove most unreliable."

Wolfe picked up his heavy blaster, went to the lock, opened the inner and outer doors, looked out. On one side was the stadium, on the other a low building, on a third a large grove.

He extruded the gangway as a small gravsled came from behind the building and shot toward the *Resolute*.

There were two women and a man aboard, and, in the back, a large case.

The lifter grounded ten feet from the *Resolute*, slewed sideways, its skids striking sparks from the tarmac.

"Freedom," one of the women shouted as she jumped out.

"Or death," Wolfe replied dryly, wondering if enough starships grounded on Bulnes' campuses for a password to be needed.

"I'm Margot," the woman said.

"And I don't have a name, and hope that isn't your real one, either," Wolfe said. "Never give away what you don't have to."

The woman appeared angry, then perplexed.

The other two lifted the case out, and staggered toward the *Resolute*. Margot glanced at Joshua as if expecting him to help. Wolfe didn't move, kept the gun ready. She gave him a dark look, helped the other two.

"All right," she said when the case was in the lock. "You'd best lift, before the Inspectorate makes a sweep over us."

"You're forgetting something," Joshua reminded her.

Her eyes flickered.

"Oh. Yes. Sorry," she said. "Sorry I forgot, but my mind was on security."

Joshua decided she was a rotten liar. The other woman brought a packet from the gravsled. Wolfe opened one end.

"It's all there," Margot said. "Don't you trust us?"

Wolfe made no reply, shuffled notes.

"Good," he said. "Now get away from the ship. We're going straight up and out."

The three ran to the gravsled, and the driver lifted it away.

"Go!" Wolfe shouted to Chesney, and hit the close sensor on the lock.

It slid shut as the *Resolute* went vertical. Wolfe grabbed for a handhold, fell against the lock door as the secondary came on, then gravity shifted as the ship's own system went on.

He looked out the tiny bullseye port at the shrinking parking area, the suddenly-tiny gravsled, and, from the copse of trees, two gravlifters lifting out of concealment.

"Hit it hard," Wolfe called. "Our customers just got shopped!"

Wolfe let the radiation-counter clatter for a moment, shut it off, and set it down beside the case.

"Whatever's in there is hot," he said. "I have no intention of opening it, even in space wearing a suit. I'll take their word it's what the rebels want."

"Good," Chesney said. "What about the money?"

"It's real, as far as I know," Joshua said. "But I'm hardly an expert on Bulnes' coins-of-the-realm. Here, give me a hand."

He and Chesney lifted the case down the passageway, lashed it down in the small cargo hold, returned to the control room.

"I need a drink," Chesney said. "You?"

"Maybe later."

Wolfe waited until Chesney had the cork out of the bottle, was about to pour.

"How much did the Inspectorate pay you to rat them out?"

The bottle jerked, and wine spilled across the table.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Merrett," Wolfe said. "When I came out of my room, before we went in-atmosphere you were talking to somebody. You heard me, jumped like a goosed doe, then came up with a cockamamie explanation that the rebels were the chatty sort."

"How much?"



A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs

Chesney eyed Wolfe. Joshua took a small pistol out of his shirt, laid it down on the table, put his hand on top of it.

"Half a mill," Chesney said reluctantly.

"Where's it to be delivered? I assume you're not planning to go back to Bulnes and collect?"

"I have a number-call account. They're transferring funds now."

"Good," Wolfe said. "You can com your banker right now, and transfer 250K to an account number I'm going to give you. Remember, the split's equal, right?"

Chesney blinked, then a smile creased his face.

"You don't care about them any more than I do."

"Why should I?" Joshua said. "I'm no more political than you."

Chesney picked up his glass, drained it, refilled it.

"You know," he said, "I might have found myself a real partner."

"Maybe," Joshua said. "But don't think that game works twice. Not on me, not on the people we're making the delivery to."

"Of course not," Chesney said. "For openers, their security... the Inspectorate I heard you call it... wouldn't have any reason to pay me if they had both sets of baddies, and the geetus as well, now would they?"

"This way, they've already made the transfer, and now they're waiting for me to tip them the wink once I reach Osirio to get the rest."

"They'll be waiting a very long time. Partner."

It looks tropical down there," Chesney said gloomily.

"The gazetteer agrees with you," Wolfe said. "I quote: 'Most of the planet is tropical to subtropical, with extensive rain forests which have been heavily exploited by the Osorians. These forests are the home of many interesting fauna, including the primeval and exceedingly dangerous *Tarafny*, click here for holo, many species of snakes, including the aggressive, dangerous-to-man...' Wolfe let his voice trail off.

"This is the motherworld," Chesney said in amazement. "They're not decadent — you have to have accomplished something for it to get rotten. And why am I always going to places where the bugs are not only bigger than I am, but carnivorous?"

"You must've been lucky in another life," Wolfe said.

"Ah well," Chesney sighed. "Here we go. In-atmosphere. Ring up our clients if you would, and see if they've got the soup on."

Wolfe touched sensors, opened a mike.

"Freedom," he said.

There was a crackle of static. He tried again.

"Or death," came back.

"Inbound per your instructions," Wolfe said. "ETA..." he glanced at Chesney.

"Fifty eight minutes," the pilot said.

"In five-eight. Will monitor this freq. Do not broadcast except for emergencies," Wolfe said.

There was the acknowledging click of a mike button.

"Well," Wolfe said. "Perhaps a professional. Or at least someone who's read a book or two."

"Here's the plan," Chesney said, and his fingers touched points on the map on a secondary screen. "I'm bringing it in over this ocean, hopefully without being noticed. I'll lo-fly to shore, then ground it here, which is the grid location they gave us, on what looks like a beach, next to this river here. If anything goes wrong, we withdraw

gracefully, leaving big black streaks. Remember, my finances have been a little close lately, so the missile tubes are for show only. The only armament the *Resolute* has are the chainguns, so we shouldn't play the bravo. Comments?"

"Other than it looks easy, which scares me, none."

"Buckle up."

Osirio swallowed their screens as they closed, and Joshua dimly heard atmosphere-roar. The screen went to gray for an instant, then came back with a real-time visual. Thick cloud cover below, blanking everything. Chesney switched to infra-red.

"Nothing much down there," he said. Wolfe examined the blotches along the shoreline, saw nothing change, flipped the scanner through various spectrums.

"I've got a little wiggle about where we're headed," Joshua said.

"Signals within the 91.5 megahertz range."

"Diagnosis?" Chesney's voice was tense.

"Don't know."

"Must be a village. I'd guess they'd have some kind of com to civilization. Just like amateurs to pick a place they can sit and drink beer in while they wait."

"Maybe."

"Wolfe," Chesney said worriedly. "I've got a—"

Alarms roared as the com blared:

"Ambush! The Inspectorate's holding the town! Break off! Go for—"

"Strong radar signal," Joshua said. "We are being tracked." His voice was cold, emotionless, very clear.

"Understood," Chesney said. His voice now could have been a duplicate of Wolfe's.

Another alarm shrilled.

"We are targeted," Joshua said.

"Your call."

"Maintain flight pattern... standby for evasive action..."

A third alarm gonged.

"I have a SAM launch," Wolfe said. The alarm rang twice more.

"I have two more launches." He could have been talking about the weather.

"Give me music. We're blown," Chesney ordered.

Joshua touched two sensors, skipped two, tapped three others.

"ECM broadcasting."

"Results?"

Joshua waited.

"Results, dammit!"

"Negative on one and three... I have a lock on two... two is wavering... he's lost contact with us... Two self-detonated."

"Your call."

"Stand by... wait... wait... roll right, dive 300 feet, jink left," Joshua ordered. "On my command... four... three... two... NOW!"

Chesney's fingers swept the control board, and the *Resolute* dove sideways, corrected, banked left.

"One toppled..." and the slam of an explosion rolled the ship.

"That was three," Wolfe said. "A bit close. Stand by... I have another launch... max evasive action... jink left... left... right... climb five-zero..."

Breathe... breathe...

"Two more launches..." he said.

Absokute Magnitude

"They're trying to pin us against that ridge." Chesney's voice cracked.

"Continue evasive maneuvering." Wolfe's voice was quite calm. *Breathe... breathe...*

"Christ," Chesney moaned. "What I'd give for one lousy little air-to-air..."

"Missile closing... jink right!"

Another explosion rocked the *Resolute*.

"Missile one... miss."

Joshua *felt* death, *felt* the second missile, remembered a time he'd used his mind to warp a counter-missile into a target, remembered the fear, *felt* death once more, and hurled a rocket, a ghost that never was, at the image onscreen.

He *felt* the power of the Lumina in the compartment behind him, *felt* it glow into life, *felt* its colors whorl around the empty room.

He felt the missile in his hands, closed them like talons, and the missile image was gone.

"Missile two self-detonated," he said, and again *reached* for the third. He *felt* nothing, there was nothing, there was no power within, nothing reached out.

"Dive," he ordered, and the *Resolute* dove toward the sea not 200 feet below.

Then there was nothing onscreen.

"Missile three missed," he reported. "Evidently lost its target." He touched a sensor, saw an exhaust flare. "I have it headed toward space."

"And we're going after it," Chesney said. "This is too much like dangerous."

"Negative," Joshua said.

"I said—"

"Remember the deal, Mister," Wolfe snapped, and his tone was the long-disused sharpness of command.

Chesney caught his breath. "Sorry. Your call."

"Over the village, full-tilt and straight for those mountains," Wolfe said. "Right over the SAM site."

"Understood."

A screen showed a cluster of buildings rushing at them, with gray-green lifters and three mobile launchers, two low-altitude chain guns that started yammering as they passed overhead, then they were over the village and there was nothing but jungle onscreen and the rising mountain ahead.

"Take her over the ridgecrest then nap of the earth until I say. Then we'll look for a hiding place to put her down on, and figure out what to do next."

"Understood," Chesney said, then the habits of the past took him, and he automatically added, "sir."

The *Resolute* sat in dimness, sixty feet underwater. The lock slid open, and a man in a spacesuit floated out. There was a long, sealed roll tied to his shoulders. He unspooled a wire from a reel at his belt, opened a small door beside the lock, plugged the reel in.

"Am I communicating?" Wolfe said.

"Very clear," Chesney answered. "I still think you're over-cautious in wanting a wire for a com. They can't be monitoring *every* freq."

"Nobody had a SAM site in that village, either."

"Strong point."

"Stand by," Wolfe said, and pushed away from the lock. The river's sluggish current took him away from the ship. He activated the suit's antigrav unit, came to the surface.

Fern-like trees reared high on either side of the river, smaller growth below them, and some brush on the ground. Water churned as the antigrav unit sent him toward a climbable bank.

There were half a dozen log-like objects lying along it. One of the logs moved, slithered off into the water as Wolfe approached.

"There are some *really* big snakes in these parts," he reported.

"Man-eaters?" Chesney asked.

"I'm not going to give them my arm as an experimental hors d'oeuvre."

He clicked on an outside mike, and jungle sounds poured in. One of the snake-like creatures opened a long, toothed slit of a mouth, and the booming roar deafened Wolfe until the mike automatically cut the volume.

"That was your friend the snake," Wolfe reported. "He's wondering whether he wants to fang me."

"He just decided it wasn't worth the bother and went swimming."

Wolfe waded ashore, unsnapped the roll, took out a small cylinder. He moved to one of the trees, activated his anti-grav to maximum power until he weighed no more than 10 pounds, went hand-over-hand up the trunk to about 100 feet above the ground. He clung to the trunk, used his gunbutt to tap a spike into it, hung the box from the spike.

"I hope," he said, "this jerry-rigged bastard works."

"No reason it shouldn't," Chesney said. "If it locates from a suit in space, it should work fine by itself with all this thick, smudgy atmosphere to go wading in."

"I would've thought, after all those years playing sojer boy, you would've learned the basic rule that when it's something you need, it's guaranteed to break."

"I'm a romantic," Chesney said. "Speaking of which, I assume the air's perfumed and smells of exotic spices."

"Hang on a minute," Wolfe said. He cut power a little, let himself drop down the tree from limb to limb until he thudded into soft, decaying leaves at the base.

"Now I'll satisfy your curiosity," he said, unsealing his faceplate.

"Well?"

"Not exactly attar of roses," Wolfe said. "Try old armpit, shit and stale beer."

"Typical jungle."

"Typical jungle," Wolfe repeated. "One down, one to go."

He went back into the river and drove toward another tree, a few hundred yards downstream.

"Freedom," Wolfe said patiently into the two microphones in front of him. He heard nothing but dead air.

"Ah, the romantic life of a soldier of fortune," Chesney murmured.

Wolfe waited fifteen minutes.

"Freedom."

"It appears the Inspectorate scooped our clients up," Chesney said. "We've been doing this for three hours now. Do you know anybody else who might need a do-it-yourself bomb?"

A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs

The speaker suddenly crackled.

"Or death."

"They're on freq one," Chesney reported. "And their password's not only stupid, but it's now got a long gray beard."

"I receive you," Wolfe said.

"Name yourself," the speaker said.

"Your supplier," Wolfe said.

"Give name of person providing materials."

"Almost enough for me to get a location," Chesney said. "And what they want's still crappy security. The Inspectorate could've pulled that woman's toenails out by now."

"Margot," Wolfe said.

"Good," the voice said. "Are you still on-world?"

"Perhaps," Wolfe said.

"Are you still willing to make delivery?"

"Affirmative."

"If you're on-planet and close to where the meet was blown today, give us your location and we'll come to you."

"I have him," Chesney said. "Lousy triangulation, but he's broadcasting from..." he looked at the onscreen map, and where two red lines intersected. "...about one ridgeline over, if this map is correct. They could get here in what, two hours?"

"You've obviously never hiked the bush," Wolfe said, and keyed the mike. "Negative on your suggestion. Somebody's leaking on your side, in case you hadn't noticed. We'll come to you."

There was a long silence, then the voice came back. Even on the tinny FM band, it reeked suspicion.

"We don't know *who* betrayed us. Dislike idea of giving present location. You could be Inspectorate on our frequency."

"True," Wolfe said. "But I already know where you are. If missiles don't start incoming in the next few seconds, suggest your paranoia unjustified."

Again, a long silence.

"Very well. We have no choice, do we? We'll await your arrival. ETA?"

"Sometime day after tomorrow. Probably in the morning," Wolfe said. "Out."

He shut off the com.

"Whyn't you get behind the controls and ready for a fast getaway," he suggested. "Just in case we're the ones who got located and we weren't chatting with noble freedom fighters." Chesney obeyed.

"So we're going to go for a walk," Chesney said. "And you're right, I've done very little forest-crawling. Do we go in nice, air-conditioned spacesuits so we don't have to get close to the local fauna?"

"Nope," Wolfe said. "Too bulky, too slow, too easy a target."

"I'd rather be an armored target than a naked one," Chesney complained. "And how'll we navigate? I understand a satellite positioning system can be a double-edged sword."

"It can," Wolfe agreed. "I've boobytrapped a few myself. We'll print out the map, and I'm going to invent a brand new device you might've never seen. It's called a compass."

"Christ," Chesney groaned. "The things I do for greed."

and pistol belts. Wolfe had a blast rifle slung. In the lock was the bulky case with the radioactive materials, a suit anti-grav generator strapped underneath it. Joshua activated the generator, turned it to high, picked up the case by a cargo strap as if it weighed no more than a pound or so.

"I wish I had a better arsenal," Chesney complained as he stepped onto the bank. "Why is it, every time I take an assignment I think I've got everything I could conceivably use, and the only things I don't have are what I really need?"

Wolfe shrugged. Chesney took a small box from his pocket, pressed sensors. The *Resolute's* lock closed, and it slipped underwater.

"I always feel naked outside the ship," he said.

"Good," Wolfe said. "Naked men stay scared. Scared men stay alive. Let's hoof."

An hour later, they passed through the ruins of a village. The wooden huts had been burnt, and there were blast-holes in some of the roofs.

Three trees had rotting, sagging ropes looped around them, and a few bones scattered nearby.

Wolfe *felt* screams, agony, prolonged death.

"How long ago did this happen?" Chesney asked.

"Maybe a year, maybe a little longer."

"Who did it?"

"Maybe rebels, maybe soldiers. As a guess," Wolfe said, "I'd go for the government. The farmers would've come back if it'd just been 'revolutionary justice.'"

"Nice people," Chesney said.

"Would it have been any more civilized," Wolfe said, voice harsh, "If they'd razed the village from the air? Or is it worse because somebody had to look in somebody's eyes as he killed him? Or her?" Chesney didn't answer. They went on.

Wolfe counted paces, consulted the map, stopped regularly and poured water from the wine bottle that was his canteen into its plas cap, floated the tiny needle he'd magnetized atop it before going on.

They stopped when the glow that was the barely-visible sun was approximately overhead. Chesney let the case down to the ground, and wheezed.

"Gad. Weight-schmeight. It's the mass somebody ought to figure out how to eliminate."

"Einstein did," Wolfe said. "And our customers are going to use his cookbook."

"I meant... never mind what I meant," Chesney opened his pak, took out two ration paks, tossed one to Wolfe. He lifted out a small bottle of wine, looked at it longingly, put it back. He touched the heater tab, waited a few moments, opened the pak, grimaced.

"I've got to learn to not buy things just because they're a bargain. What is this glop, anyway?"

Wolfe had his own pak open.

"Interesting," he said. "I'd guess some centuries ago it was intended for soldiers that might've been Earth-Japan émigrés. This would be bean paste, this pickled cucumber, this, well, some sort of

The ship surfaced at dawn, slid to the bank, and the lock opened. Wolfe and Chesney got out. They carried Wolfe's two paks

Absolute Magnitude

mussel, shellfish, which you put on the rice. The small plas pack's soy sauce."

"What's this green stuff?" Chesney said, sampling.

"Wait! That's..."

"Hot... hot..." Chesney managed in a strangled tone, and unsealed the water-filled wine bottle that now served as a canteen and gulped.

"Some sort of ground-up root," Wolfe continued. "Wasabi, I think I remember hearing it called."

"Sadistic bastards!" Chesney moaned.

66 **D**oesn't... this... damned hill ever end?" Chesney panted. "It'll be downhill tomorrow. And think how easy it'll be on the way back."

"I can't... I keep thinking about the other side of this goddamned ridge that we'll have to climb before then."

"It's easier if you don't try to talk," Wolfe advised.

"I'm a pilot, which means anything but a ground-pounder," Chesney said, ignoring the advice. "Why I ever—"

Underbrush rustled, horror rushed them. Wolfe saw pinched legs, claws, a glaring multi-faceted eye as he pinwheeled sideways, blast rifle flying away. The beast clawed at him, missed, spun on its own tracks.

Chesney had his gun out, and snapped a shot. The bolt blew off two of the creature's legs, and it shrielled agony and rage.

It reared, segmented body towering over Wolfe.

He *felt* for its brain, found nothing but raw savagery as his pistol came up, fired twice, and he dove away as the creature screeched once more, and came down.

He put another bolt, then a third into its side as it writhed, then forced calm, aimed and blew its single eye into spattering gore.

The nightmare flailed, thrashed about.

"Get around it," Wolfe shouted, and Chesney, moving very fast for a man of his size, pushed through the brush to the uphill side.

"Come on," Wolfe ordered, and the two men went uphill at a run.

The creature's death agonies... if that was what they were... continued as they pushed on.

"Gods... no. That thing doesn't deserve a god," Chesney said. "What was it? That Taradny or Tarafny you were reading about? We should've looked at the holo."

"Hell if I know," Wolfe said. "But I surely don't want to run into its big brother if it isn't."

Chesney nodded.

"I... notice," Wolfe managed, "you're not panting any more."

"Too... scared."

66 **C**an we build a fire?" Chesney asked. "I assume you know how to rub two wet sticks together, and all that woodsy lore."

It was dusk, and they'd just finished another ration pak. They'd crested the ridge an hour earlier, and Wolfe had found a campsite on

the far side, where a spring began the long run down into the valley below.

"No," Wolfe said.

"But what about that Tarantella's brother?"

"I'd rather worry about him than somebody from that village who might be airborne with a snoopers and an air-to-ground. Bugs are maybe... heatseekers are for sure," Wolfe said.

"Oh well," Chesney said. He took the rather fancy coat that was the only rainproof he had out of his pack, and rolled himself up in it. "Mrs. Chesney's favorite son wasn't meant to sleep rough," he complained. "I'll be tossing and turning 'til dawn."

Wolfe found a rock, zipped into his waterproof coat, and put the rifle across his knees.

Moments later, Chesney's breathing grew into a whiffling snore, his beard ruffling like a sail.

Wolfe grinned wryly.

Breathe... breathe...

He *felt* the Lumina, back in the *Resolute*, *felt* it flame. He reached out, around them, felt nothing, no one. He let his senses flow, like lava, over the next crest, down the long slope to the sea, toward the village where the SAMs had been, far distant.

He *felt* people, *felt* warmth, warmth of their homes, their fires. He tasted hard cold metal, like blood, and knew the Inspectorate and their missiles were waiting. He *felt* their outposts, *felt* men worried about the morrow, worried about the patrols that would range into the mountains, looking for enemies.

Joshua brought himself back, listened to Chesney's measured snore, *felt* the night around him, *felt* no menace.

He *felt* another presence, felt fright, somewhere below, somewhere in the valley they'd traverse in the day. His hand drew a line toward it in the dirt. He tried to *feel* how many there were, what they looked like, what they

thought, failed.

He opened his eyes, looked at the line he'd drawn. It followed the same azimuth he was trying to hold to, toward where the two lines from the radio-locator on the map came together.

Suddenly exhausted, he sagged back against the rock.

Rain pattered on his head, and he pulled the hood of his coat up. The rain grew harder.

Sleep now, he told his body. *Feel nothing.*

Joshua came fully awake, hearing a voice. The rain had stopped. He didn't move, but his finger slid the safety off the rifle, then he realized the speaker was Chesney. He was speaking clearly, in a low voice, but in a strange, affected accent:

"My dear chap... I have utterly *no* idea what you're talking about. No, I can't say I see any resemblance to me and this horrid boy, so stop waving that holograph in front of me. Absurd to so accuse a Federation officer!"



A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs

Wolfe was about to shake him awake, but *felt* no danger, no threat in the surrounding blackness. Chesney sighed, rolled over, snored twice, then spoke again:

"Certainly not! I've been so busy, what with the peacetime closures around this base, to even breathe. I certainly didn't know she'd taken a... a lover. I'm completely shattered. Good heavens, man, can't you recognize the obvious? It must've been some back-alley goon that tried to rob them, and things went terribly awry.

"I must say I object to this entire line of questioning, and wish to notify my commanding officer I seem to be in need of legal assistance."

Once more a long silence, then:

"Certainly not guilty, Admiral."

Now his voice went low, became a conspiratorial mutter:

"Yes. Yes, of course. It'd be an utter disgrace for an innocent man like myself to be convicted... disgraceful for the service, as well. You have no idea how I appreciate this. Yes, yes. And I thought you didn't believe me, when I told you what must've happened to her and that man.

"Of course I'll make sure I never come back here, or have anything to do with the Navy. Why should I? These fools have tried and convicted me."

Then, in a gloating voice:

"Trevor? You were wrong. Quite wrong."

Chesney laughed chillingly, then his breathing choked, and Wolfe knew he was awake.

Joshua took in a slow breath, let it rasp against the roof of his mouth, exhaled noisily.

"Wolfe?"

Joshua snorted, coughed.

"What?"

"I... just wanted to know if you were awake,"

Chesney whispered. "Sometimes my... my snoring bothers people."

"Not me," Wolfe said, in a carefully sleep-filled voice. "I can sleep through the crack of doom."

"Good," Chesney said. "Goodnight again."

Joshua knew he wasn't sleeping, but listening.

Finally Wolfe's mind, drunken monkey that it was, gave him what he'd been looking for on Merrett Chesney.

There'd been three separate tabloid sensations.

First a war hero, a special operations veteran of many close-fought engagements was accused of murdering his wife and her lover.

Then a second scandal broke. The hero had been keeping a terrible secret. His real name wasn't Chesney, but... Wolfe's mind sought for the name, couldn't bring it up. A rich youth, parents near the top of their planet's social set. The boy had been unhappy, but seemed to settle down once he'd been placed in a military school. During one summer leave, there'd been an explosion at the family's mansion, an explosion at first blamed on a faulty power grid.

Further investigation had found the blast came from a landmine stolen from a military depot that'd somehow been set off in the house.

Wolfe tried to remember how many had been killed. He couldn't, but was sure the family had been obliterated, except for the son, who'd been out with a girl that night. But he had refused to name her, refused to soil her reputation.

There'd been a trial, but the jury couldn't quite convict on a Murder Of The First Degree, and settled on a secondary charge. The boy would have served five E-years or so before being released and disappearing.

That had been the end of that... until that highly-decorated Federation Navy Commander, Merrett Chesney, had been accused of murder. Investigation revealed he'd fraudulently enlisted at the beginning of the war. He'd been a model sailor, quickly commissioned and volunteered for special operations, although there'd been whispers he wasn't adverse to enriching himself if it didn't interfere with his duties.

Chesney had married well during the war, and as soon as the Al'ar vanished set to work spending his wife's inheritance. When the money began running out, both developed wandering eyes. Then the wife and one of her lovers had been murdered, beaten to death, as Wolfe remembered.

The third sensation was after Chesney had been convicted. Before the penalty phase of the trial was completed he'd escaped, with the connivance of at least one fellow officer. That officer's body had been found next to a hanger where a patrol ship had been kept, a ship that was now missing.

No one had much time to look for Chesney — the after-war interregnum was swirling chaos. Everyone assumed he'd fled to the Outlaw Worlds and hopefully met a deserved fate.

Nice choice of partners, Wolfe, Joshua thought wryly.

Maybe I should have stayed on Ak-Mechat.

"Do not move," the voice said.

Joshua stopped in mid-step, let his boot ease to the ground.

The woman came out of the brush. Her clothes were worn but clean, her face dirt-streaked, although that might've been an attempt at camouflage. She held an old sporting rifle ready,

and Joshua noted it was very clean.

He'd sensed someone ahead for about five minutes, just after they'd struck the path they were following.

"Freedom," Wolfe said.

"Or death," the woman answered, but the gun stayed leveled.

"We have what you've bought," Chesney said, moving a hand toward the case he was lugging, freezing when the gunbarrel was holding on the middle of his chest.

"Put down the rifle, and unfasten your gunbelts," the woman ordered.

They obeyed.

A man came from the other side of the path, picked up their weapons.

"Are they carrying any communications gear?"

The man patted them down hastily, eyes meeting Wolfe's nervously, then away.

"Nothing," he said. "But in that case..."

"Don't open it," the woman and Chesney said in near-unison. Wolfe grinned, and a smile almost made it to the woman's lips.

The man shrank back as if it were a *Tarafiy*.



Absolute Magnitude

"You," the woman said, indicating Wolfe with her gunbarrel. "Carry it. You go first."

Joshua picked up the case, slung the strap over his shoulder, and started off.

Ten minutes later, the woman pushed aside brush, and they went up a narrow, skillfully camouflaged sidetrack. The ground had been planted with a tough grass that didn't show bootprints.

They came to a creek about five feet wide, with a flattened chunk of alloy for a bridge, crossed it. There was a sentry on the other side, young, alert. He looked at Wolfe and Chesney with an expression somewhere between hostility and awe.

They entered the camp. There was a rocky cliff, with a protruding rock shelf that covered the entrance to a low cave that went back for almost fifty feet.

There were at least twenty men and women in the camp.

A man came out of the cave. "You can call me Andros."

Joshua's lips quirked. "I'm tempted to introduce myself as Homme. But I'm John Taylor. This is... Archibald Tuesday." Chesney frowned for a minute, then recovered.

"Good," Andros said. "No one needs real names until the war is over."

"Sometimes not even then," Wolfe said.

"True. But we do not plan on taking our planet in the direction of Messrs. Dzhugashvili and Ulyanov."

Chesney was puzzled, not understanding what Wolfe and Andros were talking about. The woman had a faint smile on her face.

"I assume that is what we are paying so dearly for?" Andros indicated the case.

"It is."

"Very, very good. Now the tide will be on the turning."

It was just after dark. The rebels had prepared a meal while Chesney and Wolfe washed at the creek. For guerillas, Chesney said, they ate like gourmets. Fish wrapped and baked in an aromatic leaf, three kinds of unknown vegetables, a meat that tasted like pork dipped in a fiery sauce, then fruit. They drank a cool herbal tea. Their plates, utensils were military-issue plas.

Joshua and Chesney sat just outside the cave mouth with Andros and the woman who'd been introduced as Esperansa. Their guns and packs had been returned and lay beside them.

The other rebels were further back in the cave, talking quietly over the remains of their meal. There were around forty now, about half of the band, Andros said. The others were out on patrols or staked out on ambushes on the other side of the ridge.

"By rights," Andros said, "we should have had a roaring fire and a feast. But infrared detectors have taken the romance out of being a guerrilla."

"Never mind," Wolfe said. "Neither of us believe in parties when we're working." He looked around the cave.

"Something I'm curious about. You're not planning on assembling the...device here, are you?"

Esperansa laughed aloud. "No, Mister Taylor. Not here. But I shall not tell you where I'll work."

"Don't want to know," Joshua said amiably. "The only thing I'd like to know is the recipe for that pig we just ate."

"Pig?" Andros looked puzzled. "Oh. You mean the baked *tarafny*?"

Chesney sat suddenly upright, eyes wide.

"We think it's quite fair... the *tarafny* tries to eat us," Andros said, pretending not to notice Chesney's dismay, "so we eat it first."

"Never mind about the recipe," Joshua said. "I don't think, assuming the *tarafny* is the same charmer we encountered on the trail, it'd be very practical to keep a cageful aboard a starship."

"Now, perhaps we should talk business?"

Andros poured himself another glass of tea.

"Certainly." He turned. "El-Vah," he called. "Would you bring me that brown envelope that's in my bedroll?"

A young man came out of the cave carrying the fat envelope. He was armed with a pistol. He gave Wolfe and Chesney a cold look, sat down a few feet to the side.

"Let me ask something first," Andros said. "You two are quite a team. When the Inspectorate sprung their trap, we were just outside the village. We saw your ship, and knew you were doomed. But you escaped their missiles and came back through their midst, showing your contempt for the swine."

"I've never seen, heard of such piloting, such skill."

"Our cause would be greatly helped if we had an attack craft such as yours, with you two piloting it. We could strike real terror into the pigs we've sworn to destroy."

"How much?" Chesney asked flatly. "I come expensive, especially since there'd be only one of me, which makes it easier for them to pick a target."

"And my friend here isn't cheap, either. I won't tell you who he really is, but he was a high-ranking commando officer during the Al'ar War, and has great skills fighting on the land as well as in the air."

"Ah?" Andros considered Wolfe. "We could certainly use a master tactician, someone to train our recruits, perhaps lead us in raids until our own officers gain greater experience."

"Is anyone planning on asking me if I'm interested?" Wolfe asked.

"I don't know if you would be," Andros said. "For I must tell you what we're paying for that package you brought from Bulnes practically bankrupts our treasury here on Osirio. You would have to wait for payment until our coffers are replenished from Bulnes, or from some of our out-system supporters."

"Not that we would be ungenerous. We would pay what we could now, and give you ten times that once the Inspectorate has fallen."

"I've got other commitments," Joshua said. "Sorry."

"I don't have anything in the fire right now," Chesney said. "But one thing a freelancer can't do is fight on the if-come. People have a tendency to forget about what they owe once they've won."

"Wasn't it somebody named Machiavelli who suggested a lord who actually paid his mercenaries any other way than by the sword was a damned fool?"

"I understand," Andros said. "And I am sorry we could not afford your further services."

"So here are the credits we were able to raise."

He held out the envelope.

"Able to raise?" Chesney said, disbelief becoming anger.

Andros shook his head.

A Simple, Honest Deal in Bombs

"It would have been so much simpler if you'd been interested in joining us," he said, reaching behind him. "As it is, I'm truly sorry—"

Joshua's small hideout gun snapped from his sleeve and he shot Andros in the face. The man rolled on his side, his half-drawn pistol falling into the dirt.

Wolfe came forward, on one knee, as El-Vah drew his pistol, shot him in the chest. The boy made a surprised sound in his throat, tumbled backward.

Wolfe heard shouts from the cave as Esperansa brought up her rifle, fumbling with the safety. Two blasters crashed simultaneously, and she went forward, onto her face.

Wolfe had the blast rifle up, and sent a burst into the cave. He tossed Chesney his gunbelt, stuffed the brown envelope into his shirt, shouldered his pack.

"To the trail," he snapped. "Back the way we came. Stay just ahead of me."

Chesney nodded, buckling his gunbelt on, pack in his hand.

"What about the case?"

"Leave it. They almost paid for it."

Somebody shot at them, and the bolt smashed into the ground nearby. Wolfe sent another burst at random, was running, pistol belt slung over his shoulder.

The sentry was in the middle of the path, looking bewildered.

"What is happening? What—"

Chesney shot him in the head. He spasmed, throwing his rifle high overhead, fell back into the creek. They went over the bridge, and Wolfe kicked the length of alloy down into the water on top of the sentry's body.

He caught up to Chesney.

"We walk like hell for a count of one hundred," he ordered. "Then you keep walking for another hundred count, and go off into the brush and wait for me."

"What're you going to do?"

"Double back, ambush them, then join you. For pity's sakes, don't shoot somebody coming up the path whistling. It'll be me."

"Right"

"Especially since I still have the envelope with the money."

"Let's go," Chesney said. "I can hear them coming."

They went on. It was just light enough to dimly follow the path. Wolfe counted carefully, calmly.

98...99...100...

He ducked to the side, and Chesney kept moving.

Wolfe felt out, felt them coming. But he didn't need the Lumina. He saw figures in the dimness, pelting up the trail.

He stepped out, and fired a long burst.

There were screams, wild shots. Another burst followed the first, and then Wolfe went uphill once more.

Damn, but I wish I had some grenades, he thought with a bit of his mind, the rest counting.

At fifty, he stopped, frowning. He thought for a brief moment, then turned off the path.

Chesney lay prone, pistol pointing back down the path, ready to fire. He shrieked inadvertently as a hand came down on his shoulder, and Wolfe crouched beside him.

"God, god, gods," he almost sobbed. "Don't *do* that, man. My heart's not up to that. Why didn't you—"

"Wasn't sure there might not be a mistake," Wolfe said.

"I heard you shooting them up," Chesney said, voice nervous. "Did you get them all?"

"Nope. I'm not that efficient a killer."

"So what's next? Are we going to have to keep running?"

"We are... but I've got a way to slow them down, or anyway give them somebody else to worry about."

He dug into his pack.

"I brought these along in case we needed a diversion," he explained, holding up two spacesuit emergency flares. He took the end cap from one, inverted it, put it on the other end.

"Wolfe, everybody on the goddamned planet'll see that!"

"Hope so," Joshua said, and slammed his hand against the cap.



White fire hissed upward nearly a thousand feet, and blossomed into a series of red-green-red-green flashes.

Joshua sent another one after the first, Chesney still utterly bewildered.

"Now we turn left," Wolfe said. "We'll move parallel with the ridgecrest until dawn. Then we'll turn uphill again, and cross into our own valley."

"Up and at 'em, soldier."

Minutes after they started moving they heard the whine of gravlighters, and saw lights in the sky.

"Down, and hope the Inspectorate's shitty with people-sniffers," Joshua ordered.

Absolute Magnitude

Explosions boomed, and the ground shuddered around them. "Good," Joshua said. "Bomb that old jungle. Always do it the easy way."

There were high screams from the sky, and a pair of scoutships dove down. Fire blossomed from their bellies, and rockets slammed into the mountain.

"They'll keep that up all night, if I know my amateurs," Wolfe said, "then land troops on top of the mountain and sweep down. When... if... the Inspectorate discovers the cave they'll have something to keep them busy, and they won't be looking for us."

Just before dawn they heard gunfire and the blast of explosions. "They found them," Chesney said.

"Maybe," Wolfe said. "Or maybe they're shooting up each other or a really offensive tree."

"I hope they get the bastards."

"Why? They did something stupid," Wolfe said, "and it seems to me they've already paid for it."

"I don't like people who try to kill me."

"An understandable emotion. I frequently share it."

Chesney was staggering by the time the sun came up. Joshua found an impenetrable thicket, and they pushed their way into it.

Chesney went immediately to sleep, not offering to stand guard.

Wolfe let his senses float out, *felt* nothing, calmed himself, breathing steadily, let his body relax while his mind watched.

Around midday, Chesney grunted, woke up.

He saw Wolfe sitting crosslegged, counting money.

"How much do we have?"

"A little less than half a million," Joshua said. "Again, it appears real." He shook his head. "They should've bargained instead of going for the guns. Two-thirds isn't bad soldier's pay."

Chesney nodded agreement.

"You're right," he said. "Lord knows I've taken less and not cried all night. But why the hell can't people stay honest?"

Wolfe looked at him without replying.

Chesney had the grace to turn away.

They moved slowly, quietly, following the mountain crest, until almost midnight, then holed up until just before dawn.

Aircraft constantly passed overhead, scoutships, lighters, gravsleds. But none slowed, so Wolfe paid no mind.

They crossed the few open spaces at a trot, after spending time listening carefully.

"We're making a big circle," he explained. "We'll have one more night in the open, then make the *Resolute* not long after first light."

"Oh lord, a consummation devoutly to be made," Chesney misquoted fervently. "I never knew I could smell so bad. I'm going to *live* in the fresher until further notice. Is this what it's like being a soldier?"

"Nope," Wolfe said. "It's when you don't know you stink and don't care, either, that you start soldiering."

That night, when Chesney slept, Wolfe slid over beside him. He picked up Chesney's pistol, pushed its bellmouth firmly down

into the ground they lay on. He wiped the dirt from the outside of the barrel, and set it back down near the pilot's hand.

Chesney touched controls on the tiny box, waited.

Brown water roiled, and the *Resolute* surfaced. Its secondary drive hummed, pushed it close to the bank. Its lock door opened, and the gangway slid out.

Wolfe started down the bank.

"Joshua."

Wolfe stopped.

"Turn around, Wolfe. I don't like being a back-shooter unless I have to."

Joshua obeyed.

Chesney had his pistol aimed in both hands at Wolfe's chest.

"I really don't think three quarters of a mill is enough for two people," he said, and his voice was the same gloat it'd been when he told Trevor he was wrong. "And I don't think I'll be sharing it with our mutual friend, either."

"You don't want to do that, Merrett," Joshua said.

"Oh, but I have to," Chesney said, and his voice had a tone like the ring of cracked crystal. "I knew you weren't sleeping. I knew I was talking in my sleep. No one must know about me. No one."

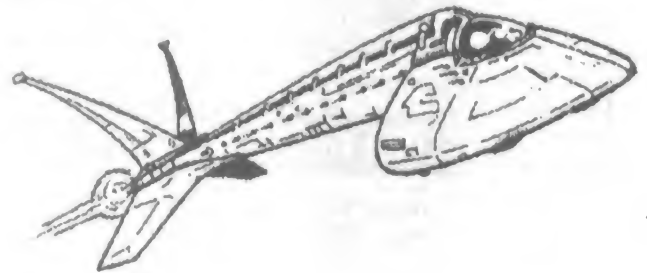
"I said, don't do it," Wolfe said calmly.

The dirt-clogged barrel of Chesney's gun was aimed steadily at Wolfe.

"But I'm going to," Chesney said.

Wolfe turned, started up the *Resolute's* gangway.

Merrett Chesney laughed again, convulsively jerked the trigger of the pistol.



Bellatrix, Anilam

by Kendall Evans

Despite the smog

& city lights

I can still find Orion

Primary Ignition

Cape Canaveral Diary
by Allen Steele

September 23, 1995: So there I am, sitting in a booth in Fat Boy's Barbecue on Route A1A in Cocoa Beach, Florida, chowing down after an eight-hour travel day from the mountains of western Massachusetts but feeling right at home because I've been hitting this untouristed little restaurant ever since my first trip to the Cape thirteen years ago, when a black dude only slightly smaller than Mike Tyson comes in and threatens to kill a middle-aged white guy in another booth only a few feet away.

I don't catch the beginning of the commotion, because my face is buried in this morning's *Florida Today*. I'm reading about the fifth computer crash aboard the *Mir* space station and wondering whether I'm about to witness the launch of the first orbital rescue mission, then all at once someone's yelling obscenities, and the next thing I know, the waitress is ushering the big dude out the door and telling him not to come back.

A moment later, though, a plump woman with blond hair braided in a snaky mass of cornrows stalks in and snarls something I don't quite catch at the same gent. He appears to be no more than another sunburned Floridian—a bit paunchy, white-haired and double-chinned, wearing a T-shirt and baggy shorts—yet there's a certain look about him that suggests he's someone you shouldn't mess with, regardless of age or appearance. An ex-Marine, or perhaps an off-duty cop. The woman is unmistakably trailer trash, though, and the waitress promptly throws her out, too; she's about to lock the front door ("That guy threatened to kill him," she murmurs to no one in particular. "I don't want no murders in here.") when the middle-aged man suddenly leaps up and charges out into the parking lot.

The door's behind me and there's a window next to my booth, so I can see everything: the beat-up Chevy packed with mean-looking blacks, the cornrowed moll, and—most importantly—the tough guy and the legbreaker, chasing each other around the Chevy. It almost looks like a Chinese fire drill, until the tough guy jumps up on the hood of the Chevy, causing the legbreaker to dodge behind a car parked nearby. The car happens



to be mine, and now I'm suddenly happy that I sprung for full insurance when I rented it at the airport a couple of hours earlier.

The waitress is dialing 911, the other patrons are either petrified or hysterical, and I'm sliding out of my booth and preparing to throw myself to the floor; if anyone pulls a gun. I don't want to be caught by a stray bullet. But then legbreaker dives into the Chevy and it peels out of the lot. The tough guy calmly walks back into the restaurant, returns to his booth, and resumes eating as if nothing has happened, even as a family is bolting for the door and police cruisers are pulling into the lot. The waitress offers another beer on the house, and the owner comes out of the kitchen to apologize, but I figure that this is a good time to finish my pork sandwich and get back to the Holiday Inn where I ditched my bags less than an hour ago. I don't know what this was all about, nor do I care to learn.

Florida's been gonzo for many years now, but Cocoa Beach has always seemed one the less dangerous places to visit: A town with the sort of rundown charm that suggests Jimmy Buffett songs and John D. MacDonald novels, it's always taken pride in its proximity to legend. Fat Boy's is a typical example: an old astronaut hangout whose walls are decked out with autographed pictures of NASA flyboys going back to the days of Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo, along with a few flygirls from the earlier Shuttle missions. Surf shops like RonJon's sold both boards and NASA mission patches, bars had names like the

Moon Hut, and even the old Sea Missile Motel, a cheesy dive which offered hourly rates and whose rooms had vibrator beds and condom machines, had its lobby walls covered with flyspecked photos of '60s ICBM launches.

But the Sea Missile was torn down a few years ago to make room for a shopping center, the astronauts no longer eat at Fat Boy's, and old Cocoa Beach is quickly disappearing. I can forgive RonJon's turning into a garish department store for surfer wannabes, or even the resort hotels and malls that have sprung up along Route A1A where there were once bait shops and comfortable bars, but when thugs start showing up in the parking lot of Fat Boy's, you realize that the Cape has entered an edgy, dangerous new era.

And so, perhaps, has space exploration itself.

I've returned once more to the Cape because of the kindness of a friend: Patrick Molloy, an engineer at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Pat's a southern SF fan, just as I am from time to time, and we ran into each other again last May during Kubla Khan 25 in Nashville, my hometown. As the con was winding down late Sunday afternoon, he casually inquired whether I had ever seen a shuttle launch.

Indeed I had, way back in '85, when I was still a working journalist: Mission 51-D, Senator "Barfing Jake" Garn's flight aboard *Discovery*, launched just a few months before the *Challenger* disaster. One of the more interesting assignments of my former career, even if the launch itself wasn't one of the best: *Discovery* vanished into low clouds less than a minute after it cleared the tower, and I had left the press mound feeling just a little bit cheated. Since then, I'd always wished I could see another one.

It turns out that, as a senior NASA employee, Pat was in the position of recommending individuals to be invited to upcoming Shuttle launches: one of the perks of working for Uncle Sam's space agency. I urged him to, by all means, invite me... and then all but forgot about this exchange until late August, when I received official NASA

Primary Ignition

correspondence from Marshall Center, requesting my presence at the launch of STS-86.

Under any other circumstances, this would have been a "milk-run" mission: another trip up to Russia's *Mir* space station to replace one American crew member with another and to deliver some supplies. Indeed, it was easy to forget that NASA Shuttles had rendezvoused with *Mir* six times already since 1995, yet during the long summer of 1997, an unsettling series of events had conspired to make STS-86 one of the more notable missions of the Shuttle program, if not the history of spaceflight.

Mir is an old space station. It may be difficult for SF fans, who tend to think of spacecraft as being somehow invulnerable because they're positioned hundreds of miles above Earth, to imagine a space station ever becoming decrepit and nigh-obsolete, yet this is exactly what happened. When its core module was launched in 1986, the Soviet Union still existed, Ronald Reagan was in his second White House term, U2 was a scruffy alt-rock band, and the Apple Macintosh was the best desktop system money could buy. How's that for ancient history?

Over the next eleven years, Russia managed to oust the Commies, the U.S. replaced Reagan, U2 went mainstream, and Apple became a de facto subsidiary of Microsoft. Yet no one had ever gotten around to upgrading the computers aboard *Mir*, and although Glavkosmos added four modules to the core, that station continued to rely on Soyuz and Progress spacecraft designed when Grandma was wearing miniskirts; when the USSR crumbled, so did the Burn shuttles intended to take their place. But the Russians still had the world's only space station, and since the U.S. was committed to peaceful cooperation in space with its former Cold War rival, it behooved the Americans to partake of the long experience the Russians had developed with operating *Mir*, especially since the U.S. was preparing to build its own space station. Yet *Mir* had already suffered several accidents and was already having to be repaired on a continual basis, and the first NASA astronauts to spend time aboard the station were coming back saying that it was like going on vacation in Antarctica, only without the nightlife.

And then came the summer of 1997. On February 23, a fire broke out within the station; it raged for nearly ten minutes, and although it was then claimed that the three-man crew wasn't in any great danger, it

was later learned that they nearly had to abandon ship before the fire was doused. On June 25, the *Spektr* science module suffered a blowout when it was struck by a Progress cargo vessel; again, first reports stated that the crew was never in any danger, yet it was eventually disclosed that NASA astronaut Michael Foale was sent to the Soyuz escape module, which he was only marginally capable of piloting had the station been evacuated.

When accidents aboard American manned spacecraft occur, they're usually underplayed by NASA's Public Affairs Office. This goes all the way back to the Apollo 1 fire, when nearly two months went by before the public learned the exact circumstances of the blaze which killed White, Chaffee, and Grissom; old-hand space reporters like to say the agency's initials really mean Never A Straight Answer. Yet this time, it wasn't NASA's fault: *Mir* Mission Control wasn't being perfectly candid with NASA, and as a result there was a new sense of distrust between the two agencies.

After that, things began to go increasingly downhill, as if a domino effect was taking effect and, one after one, the tiles were toppling. The principal oxygen supply system failed, forcing the crew to rely upon crude back-up systems. The aging main computer went down again and again—five times total—and there were no spares aboard. Maneuvering jets misfired, causing the entire complex to tumble and forcing the new Russian crew which had arrived only two weeks earlier to shut down all electrical power while the computer was rebooted. One of the solar panels had been knocked out of commission by the Progress collision; a risky repair job within the *Spektr* module—the first EVA within a spacecraft, no small feat in itself—partly solved the problem by jury-rigging a severed electrical conduit, but it was a band-aid solution at best, and *Spektr* itself remained unpressurized. The station nearly collided with a defunct American military satellite which it could have easily avoided had not the computer been on the fritz again; once again, all hands were ordered into the Soyuz escape capsule, which itself would show indications of leaking oil only a few days later.

All the while, Glavkosmos continued to insist that it could hold things together, even while they were openly scapegoating the last cosmonaut team for all the problems. In the meantime, Israeli TV began showing milk commercials filmed aboard *Mir* only a few

months earlier, while Americans, flush with victory from the success of the *Mars Pathfinder* mission, were again talking about sending a manned mission to Mars as its next major space objective. But the little *Sojourner* rover was a robot; when it got stuck beneath a boulder, no lives were in danger. The same couldn't be said for the American astronaut and Russian cosmonauts aboard *Mir*.

Watching all this take place—from reading the *New York Times*, Reuter's News Service and ABC News Online reports on AOL, and watching the *CBS Evening News*—it occurred to me that the unfolding story was a real-life SF thriller. *Mars Pathfinder* was getting most of the attention, but the real drama was in low Earth orbit, less than two hundred miles away.

And now here I was, at the Cape, about to witness for the latest chapter of this twisted saga: the launch of the next shuttle flight to *Mir*.

Thursday, September 25: at 6:45 p.m., the Marshall guests began climbing aboard air-conditioned charter buses parked in front of the Cocoa Beach Holiday Inn. NASA guest liaisons checked off our names as we filed past, and gave us enamel pins bearing the STS-86 mission emblem. In each seat was a Launch Guest button and a white folder containing a press kit, fact sheets, photos, and yet another mission emblem sticker (I had collected three already). Once we were settled in and heads were counted, the doors closed and the buses began trundling down A1A toward Merritt Island and the Kennedy Space Center.

It was a mixed group: young people, old people, space buffs, people barely literate in NASA lingo, retired aerospace workers, foreign visitors, college students. I was the token SF author, but that was no big whoop; no one I met had ever heard of me or read my work. Some of these folks were former NASA people; they stiffened when they learned I was a writer, then relaxed when I quickly added that I wasn't a reporter. Old animosities die hard.

Forty-five minutes later, the buses pulled into the KSC Visitors Center, located several miles from the Vertical Assembly Building. This was the umpteenth time I had been to the Visitors Center, the third this trip alone; indeed, I had driven out here only this morning, to watch the 3-D Imax SF movie *L5: First City In Space* and, by coincidence, catch the televised news conference in which NASA Chief Administrator Daniel Goldin

Absolute Magnitude

announced his decision to allow astronaut-physician David Wolf his ride on STS-86, where he'd replace Michael Foale as the next American astronaut aboard *Mir*.

It had been a controversial decision, opposed by many in Congress who saw *Mir* as a deathtrap and the Russians as taking advantage of NASA. It's curious that the Congressmen voicing dissent were all Republicans and that they seldom failed to mention Vice President Al Gore as being the White House architect of the *Mir* rendezvous program; would they have been quite so adamant if Jack Kemp was VP? And it was hardly as if Wolf was being marched to Pad 39-A at gunpoint; all along, he had stated his willingness to stay aboard *Mir* for the next five months, regardless of the potential danger. Yet the Russians were putting on pressure of their own. If Foale was pulled off *Mir* and Wolf didn't take his place, they would view it as Americans welshing on an important treaty agreement. The Russians needed Yankee dollars to keep their ailing space program alive, while NASA saw Russian participation as vital to the success of the International Space Station. So while Rep. James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin—the same state which gave us the late William Proxmire, another great friend of the space program—was claiming that Wolf was going to *Mir* “to spend months being an assistant Mr. Fix-It,” *Mir* program director Valery Ryumin was countering that NASA astronauts would look like “sunshine explorers... as soon as something goes wrong, they decide to head for the hills.”

Them's fightin' words, and Ryumin uttered them like a man ready to tuck his hands beneath his armpits and start making chicken noises; in the duel of soundbites, he won. It was Goldin's call, and after keeping everyone in suspense for several days, he called heads, probably praying that his own wouldn't be handed to him.

Now it was less than three hours to launch, and Ryumin himself was one of several hundred people crowded together in the Imax theater where I had watched a movie earlier that day. There was a Russian Air Force general sitting directly behind me—why do all these guys have the same hair style?—and a large handful of French representatives from the European Space Agency being, well, French, and several NASA astronauts in blue jumpsuits scattered throughout the audience, looking for all the world like extras from a rerun of *The Cape*.

The house lights went down, and once again a NASA public affairs official took the stage to give the audience a rundown of the highlights of the upcoming mission. It was much the same briefing as the one delivered yesterday in this same room; the crowd was restless by the time he finished, yet we weren't yet ready to be taken to the viewing area. Now one of the blue-jumpsuited astronauts came to the podium, and he spent another forty-five minutes introducing us to the eight STS-86 crewmembers, as seen from slides projected on the mammoth screen behind him. Some of it was genuinely funny—mission specialists Scott “Too-Tall” Parazynski and Wendy Lawrence making faces at the camera, David Wolf wearing a propeller beanie and oversized sunglasses—and some of it was fascinating, such as a first-hand account of what it's like to be aboard a Shuttle during liftoff, but the audience was fidgeting and checking their watches by the time he was through, and practically made a dash for the waiting buses when the briefing finally ended.

A thunderstorm had blown over the Cape at four o'clock. The twilight sky was overcast when we had walked into the Imax theater, but now night had fallen and the stars had come out. It was going to be a good, clear evening for a launch. The buses pulled out of the Visitors Center lot and, led by a KSC police car, moved down the road toward the launch site. Above palmettos in the surrounding marshes, bright blue searchlights lanced upward into the black sky.

As the buses approached the viewing site just north of the VAB, I found myself making a crucial decision of my own: binoculars or camera? I was carrying one of each, but I suddenly realized that it would be impossible to juggle both at the moment of liftoff. The camera had a 35mm lens and was loaded with ASA 400 film: perfectly adequate for daytime pictures at close range, such as the bus tour of the launch facilities I had taken yesterday, but ridiculous for night shots of an object more than three miles away. I opted for the binoculars; I could always download photos off NASA's web site later.

The buses arrived at the viewing site and I joined the shuffle down the vehicle aisle, pausing only for a moment at the stairs to slather my arms, neck, and face with insect repellent thoughtfully provided by the guest liaisons. It was high mosquito season in Florida, and there was an encephalitis alert on the area. Now reeking of Off!, I trotted to the bleachers, intent on finding the perfect spot for watching the show. I found it just behind

a knee-high log fence in front of two countdown clocks facing the bleachers. Although liftoff was still about an hour away, the countdown stood at T-minus nine minutes, the built-in hold that is standard operating procedure for shuttle launches.

And there—just over three miles away, on the other side of the broad dark expanse of the Banana River, caught within the blue searchlights—was Pad 39A, and the NASA Space Shuttle *Atlantis*.

Resting on its launch platform next to the tower, *Atlantis* stood 180 feet tall, from the nozzles of its twin solid-rocket boosters to the tip of its rust-red external fuel tank, and weighed 4,514,873 pounds, including the orbiter itself along with the Spacehab module and docking system nestled in its cargo bay. On this fine autumn evening, ground controllers had exactly eight minutes in which to get this enormous vehicle off the ground and into low orbit; the reason for the narrow launch window was because the shuttle had to rendezvous with *Mir* during its subsequent passes over the United States. If the launch had to be scrubbed tonight, *Atlantis* wouldn't get another chance until the next night; however, local weather forecasts were calling for a seventy percent chance of thunderstorms on Friday, and eighty percent on Saturday.

Yet there seemed little doubt that STS-86 was go for launch. Storms boiled on the eastern horizon, backdropping Pad 39-A with flashes of reddish-orange lightning that lit up the underbellies of low clouds, yet they were so far away that we couldn't even hear the thunder. The night air was still, with only the slightest ocean breeze; fireflies haunted the grassy river bank. I sat on the fence, smoked, peered through the binoculars at the distant pad, watched people setting up camera tripods and taking souvenir shots of their spouses and friends posing next to the countdown clocks. I was tempted to visit the nearby shed and see the old Apollo 18 Saturn V, newly restored and relocated to this new building from its old location next to the VAB, but I didn't want to abandon my spot; the bleachers were filled to maximum capacity, and I had already stared down one guy who had tried to push me aside.

When the clocks began running again at T-minus-8 minutes 59 seconds, the crowd applauded like a rock audience spotting the backstage lights go down. The viewing area was situated between 39B to the left and 39A to the right; this meant that we couldn't see most of the shuttle from behind the

Primary Ignition

rolled-back service structure, and then only the top of the external tank. We couldn't see the crew access arm when it swung away, and I could only detect the barest motion from the launch tower when the beanie cap—the fuel nozzle leading from the launch tower to the external tank—was lifted away. I trained my field glasses on the bottom of the launch pad, knowing that this would be where I'd see the first signs of liftoff.

At T-minus-five minutes, the lights around the viewing area were shut down. Another roar of approval, immediately followed by sporadic flashes from those clueless enough to believe that their camera strobes would illuminate an object three miles away (one can imagine a slide-show in Peoria: "And here's the launch pad...oh, no, that's the back of Walter's head.") Over the loudspeakers, we could hear static-filled crosstalk between Launch Control and *Atlantis's* flight deck as they went down the rest of the checklist.

A nervous, anticipating silence fell over the crowd in the final sixty seconds of the count, until all we could hear was the voice of the pad talker: "Launch minus 20 seconds ... launch minus fifteen seconds ... T-minus ten, nine, eight, seven..."

At the three-second mark, brownish-black smoke, lit from within by amber fire, blossomed from beneath the base of the service structure: primary ignition of *Atlantis's* main engines. Then the count reached zero, a brilliant yellow-white fireball detonated, and an instant later the Shuttle rose into full view, half-lit from below by a dense column of flame.

Yelling at the top of my lungs, I watched the big machine rise, rise, rise... then the intense glare, magnified a hundred times by my binocular lenses, dazzled my retinas. I quickly dropped the glasses: a thumb-shaped, thumb-size afterimage appeared in the center of my field of vision. Stupid! But now I could see everything else my binoculars' narrow focus had prevented me from noticing:

The entire coastline illuminated by a greenish-magenta false twilight.

The waters of the Banana River rippling outward from the far bank, against the current.

Egrets and herons, eagles and sparrows, all taking wing at once from the surrounding marshes, silhouetted against the brightness.

The shuttle itself, arching into the starlit sky on a long, growing horn that seemed to rip space itself apart, even as the crackling, kettle-drum roar of liftoff pounded across the miles separating us from the pad.

Upward, outward... going, going, going... the Shuttle thundering out over the Atlantic, the noise gradually fading even as it diminished into a tiny red spot that failed to disappear even when it was more than 360 miles downrange.

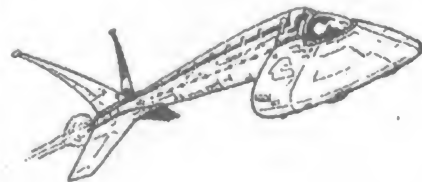
Then its main engine cut off, the spot disappeared, and the show was over. *Atlantis* was once again in space.

It's tempting to end a first-person account of a Shuttle liftoff with a sermon on the Meaning Of It All: why we go into space, what we're trying to accomplish, so forth and so on. But you've probably heard it all before, and I'm not going to reiterate arguments that countless others before me have made, and probably far better than I could. Speeches are for politicians, and I'm a science fiction author: I'm just here for the beer.

But here's a thought: although it's arguably more of a risk to spend five months on a Russian space station than to have dinner at a barbecue joint on Route A1A, I rather doubt David Wolf is going to have to worry about being caught as an innocent bystander to a parking lot brawl. There's risk involved in virtually everything we do, every single day, whether we're conscious of it or not. We assume these risks because of the potential benefits they present, and play the odds that we won't get caught under the wire. That's the way life is.

Space exploration is dangerous. It probably always will be dangerous, no matter how sophisticated we make future spacecraft or how much we minimize the hazards by building in redundant safety features. But it's through this sort of grand effort that frontiers are conquered; not by doing the same, safe-and-proven things over and over again, but by taking on new challenges.

Staying home all the time is boring. Sometimes you've just got to go out to eat.



Letters Column

Dear Warren,

I've been enjoying the fine stories in *Absolute Magnitude*. I wanted to vote for you for a Hugo, but I'm not sure which category you are eligible for.

Catherine Asaro

—Catherine, thanks for asking. There has been quite a bit of confusion as to which Hugo we're eligible for because of all the different standards used to judge pro zines. The SFFWA has had us listed as a pro zine for several years, but by Hugo standards, which are tougher, we are still eligible for the semiprofessional Hugo. Personally, I am also eligible for best professional editor because of the *Absolute Magnitude* anthology.

Dear Warren:

Some comments on issue #6. Despite her unwieldy name, Denise Lopes Heald can really write. I'd like to see more of her stories. "In The Misty Days of Steel Men" by Gene KoKayKo was very entertaining, but the ending wasn't satisfying; it felt like an episode from a serial. Jamie Wild's story "The Cyber Way" was also very entertaining. I haven't read the complete issue yet. The cover was excellent, a striking image—even better, perhaps, than the story it illustrated. A fascinating editorial, and I found myself agreeing with much that you had to say, but I wish you had taken it even further, and given some specific examples of what you meant.

Sincerely,
Kendal Evans

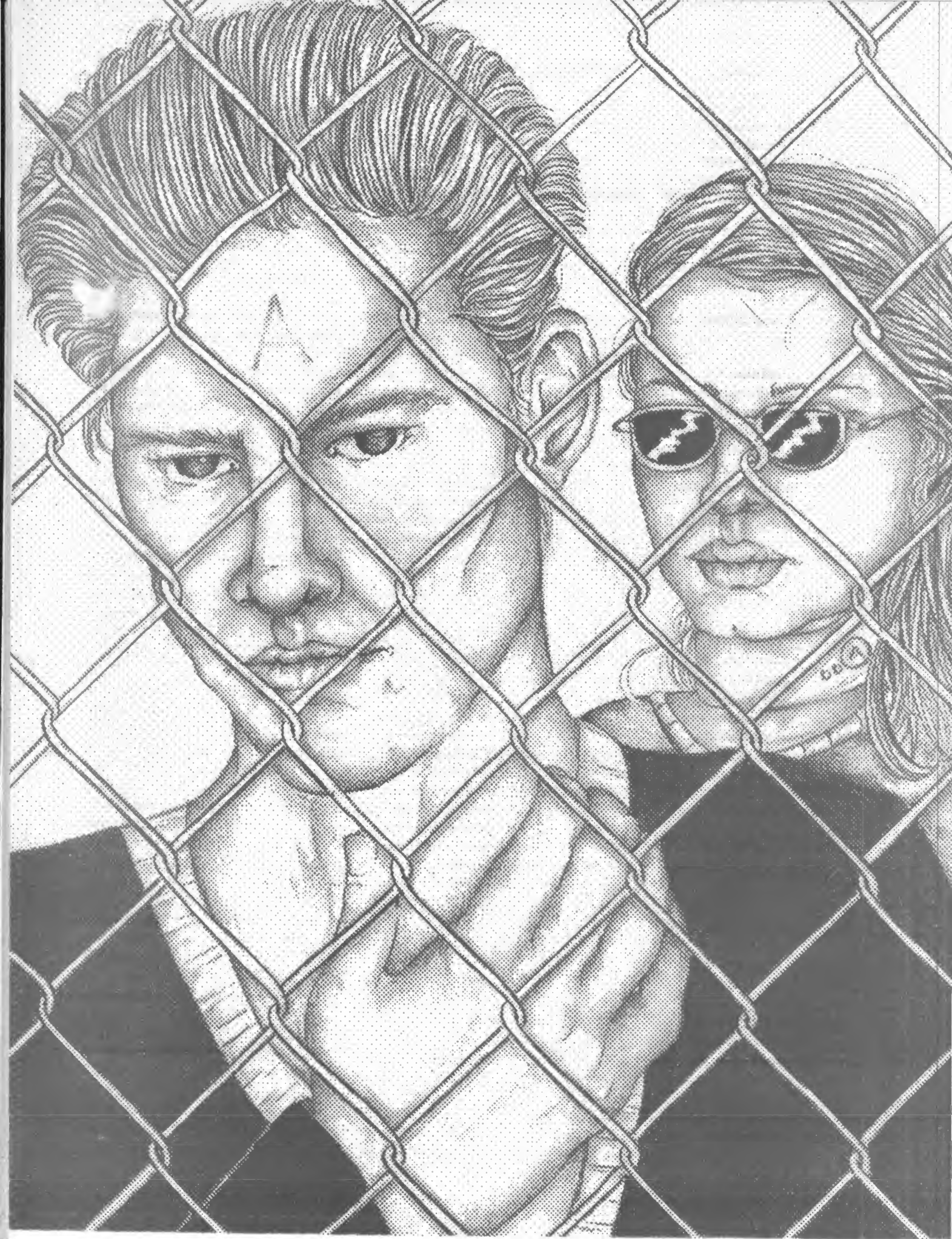
Lakewood CA 90713

To Whom it May Concern,

I like your magazine *Absolute Magnitude* very much and am planning to subscribe as soon as I reach my new residence in Kentucky. I particularly liked "Empirical Facts" (Fall 1996) and "The Cyber Way" (Winter 1996). Much to my dismay however I missed part 1 of *Kill All The Lawyers*, but the other two parts were quite good.

Sincerely,
William S. Fisbee
Miami FL





F. Alexander Brejcha came to America from Sweden in 1968 at the age of ten, and discovered Star Trek and the "juvenile" science fiction of Robert Heinlein. Thus was born an addiction to science fiction. M.S. related—Disabilities have ruined his original art studies, but now he divides his time between working full-time as a telephone operator/trauma dispatcher (where a wheelchair is irrelevant), writing disability-related magazine and newspaper articles, and indulging his first love by writing science fiction. He has had over a dozen stories published in Analog Science fiction and Fact. His Personal and Disability Resource Web Site is located at <http://www.netreach.net/~abrejcha> where a number of his works are posted.

Another Scarlet Letter

by F. Alexander Brejcha

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Propelled by an explosion of sound, I threw myself out the car door and hit the ground rolling as my face was slashed by cutting concrete slivers thrown up by the bullet that slammed into the sidewalk inches from my shoulder. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth, and my hands were stinging and oozing red and clear liquid from where they were scraped raw from my ungraceful landing. Wincing in pain I scrambled to my feet. But before I could make another move, the front door of the squad car burst open and Officer Sawyer jumped out to fire at me again. People screamed and threw themselves to the side as I froze, unable to move even though I felt the tug of a bullet in my jacket and a breeze at my side before I heard the thunder of her gun. Glass exploded behind me from a shop window that took the bullet that might have been meant for me.

The crystalline shower snapped my trance and I turned to duck down the stairs at 16th and JFK. I didn't know anymore if this was real or not, I just burrowed into the passages that honeycombed the ground under Philadelphia's City Hall. It was familiar turf and I felt safe down in the eerie underground world where the subway, the commuter trains and the elevated all linked up, and a whole other city had come into existence. Shops, vendors and homeless all swirled together in a bizarre mélange that mirrored—in a slightly distorted and fluorescently-lit manner—the dying commercial world above. But here there was no more pretense. It was a battle to survive and no one denied it.

I ran through the concrete and tile maze trying to ignore the depressing images assaulting me. I could see the despair in the haunted looks of the woman selling flowers from a home-made cart as she called out to me:

"Please, buy a flower for your lady, sir!"

I hurried past and ignored her as she reached out undaunted to someone else behind me: "Buy your man a little life for his drab suit, lady. You wouldn't believe how much better he'd look with this on his collar."

I could also hear the hopelessness in the voice of the newspaper and magazine vendor as he pitched his latest acquisition: a data-link to the State Lottery computer—the newest one down here. "Get your lottery tickets," he hawked. "Couldn't you use a couple of million extra? Only two dollars for a chance to buy a part of the dream. This week's Escape Ticket is up to twenty million dollars. Just think: maybe you'll be the only winner!"

And people were lining up to try. I could almost feel the tug myself. Where else was there even a chance to win freedom? The lottery computer knew no sex, no race, no blood type or H.I.V. infection. Only a number.

But there was an Aider after me and I ran, dodging through the press of people.

Around turn after turn I rushed, running down long corridors covered with graffiti under which some faded tile tried to shine though. Smells of urine, beer, marijuana and despair rose up to taunt me with every thudding step, but I stayed down in the hidden world because I knew that down under Broad Street I could go all the way south to Spruce Street, and then I only had to come aboveground for four blocks on the way to 10th. I passed Chestnut and turned away from an older man in a stained and tattered coat pissing against a support post while whistling Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—perfectly in tune and tempo. Ten years earlier he had probably been First Violin with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

As I saw daylight briefly from the stairs leading up to Locust Street I heard the sound of sirens, but I couldn't tell from where or how close. The Mummies were strutting up Broad Street, and their irritatingly frantic banjo strumming and the accompanying, discordant brass and drums masked and diluted the wavering tones of the siren. I moved on. Only one person knew that I was heading for Jackson's, and as I climbed cautiously up to street level at Broad and Spruce where the underground tunnel ended, I looked around for any scarlet squad cars or uniforms. There were none. Just a thinning crowd as the Mummies disappeared, the last contingent having passed on to leave the dingy, snowless Broad Street littered with a sea of confetti and crushed paper mugs reeking of beer and stronger spirits.

I kept to the walls of the houses and held my head bent down as I hurried east on Spruce, heading for 10th Street as I mentally rehearsed my introduction to the people at Jackson's. I wondered how quickly Sawyer could spread the message about me, but considering the number of people who had police-band radios, I was sure the word would spread. Hopefully all the AIDS-Police knew what was going on and would leave me alone. Assuming Sawyer was on the level. But as I picked concrete chips out of my raw and bloodied palms I realized that the officer could easily have killed me if she had wanted to. She had just made sure my escape looked real. But that left me trying to come to terms with the bizarre concept of helping an Aider.

Just that morning I had started my day with a demoralized walk along the Schuylkill River, shocked by confronting my image in a

Absolute Magnitude

plate glass mirror strapped onto a glass truck stopped at a traffic light. I had stared at the reflection of the ragged letter "A" organically embedded in my forehead, close to vomiting as the reality of how my life had changed was reinforced.

The scarlet "A."
I stood staring at it with hypnotic fascination until the truck with its mirror pulled away with an illegal belching of unfiltered exhaust. A single ragged letter. Nothing more. Nothing less. But the organic branding had changed my life. People shied away from my touch, and women wouldn't talk to me. Even other men pointed and crossed the street.

I was so fucking lonely!

I turned away angrily and took off up the Parkway. I needed a long walk and I headed up past the Art Museum and the lifeless winter Azalea Gardens, and past Boat House Row where preppy fraternities still congregated in old houses that shone at night in a sparkling miniskyline of decorative lights overlooking the river. And as I walked along Kelly Drive, I wondered why they had changed the name. East River Drive sounded so much more pastoral, so much more descriptive. In the right light, even the turgid surface of the meandering Schuylkill had a certain beauty.

Like today.

I looked out over the river. Some masochistic rowers were out sculling in their narrow craft, dodging ice-floes on glowing water that picked up the morning sunlight to chip it into scintillating rays which spread behind the slender wood platforms.

Liquid gold dripped off the oars, and the bare trees that stood sentinel added a silent visual drama of their own as the morning light gently caressed their naked and bleached trunks.

I stood alone on the river bank and watched the powerful stroking of the oars.

I would always be alone now.

It was the type of morning that should have made me feel alive. It was the first weekend in the year 2020 and the new century had gotten underway without the predicted Armageddon, and the morning air was crisp and almost clean—though somewhere nearby someone was illegally burning wood in an unfiltered fireplace. Traces of aromatic smoke teased my nostrils and danced around in my head to trigger memories of growing up on the Main Line outside Philadelphia in a big house with a huge living room fireplace where I would sit with my older brother and feed pieces of wood to the flames. One by one. The light, the warmth, the smell.

Home.

Except they weren't happy memories any more.

The gracious isolation of the stately mansions of the Main Line was gone now. They had been surrounded by condominium developments and shopping malls as the city drove out more and more of the middle and upper classes. Those who deserted left a decaying city of desperate people, dotted with enclaves of die-hard optimists who refused to give up. But it was a city that was my home now that my family no longer recognized me. For the past month I

had lived on the streets and in the shelters, fed and clothed by reluctant charity while people wished I would hurry up and die. No landlord would rent to me and no employer would hire me. My money was gone and my dignity was not even a memory.

The A on my forehead that was responsible for my fall from grace burned into my soul.

I heard laughter behind me and turned to see a young couple balancing on the concrete wall that adjoined the sculpture collection between the river and the nearly empty Kelly Drive that wound along the grassy banks. It was Sunday morning. Only a few cars were buzzing along, ignoring the beauty of the morning and the laughter of the young lovers.

She was very pretty, with long brown hair that was tied in a simple pony tail and partially covered by a blue knit cap with a wide fuzzy ball of yarn. Her cheeks were bright red from the cold, and a slight mist surrounded her laughter. She was wearing a bright blue ski parka with red stripes and black stretch ski pants that showed off beautiful legs with the muscled thighs and calves of a dancer—or a skier. She couldn't have been more than twenty, and full of enviable life.

Her lover was older, but not much.

He was handsome enough, in a rough-hewn sort of way, but he didn't look terribly bright, and their matching parka and pants made them look too cute as a couple. Suddenly I was irritated by the way they were carrying on.

Because Trish and I had often carried on like that.

All at once I remembered sitting across from her in a pizza place, my hands over hers to lightly hold them in place until she pulled one hand out and parked it over mine with a grin. I had done the same, and soon we had been piling hand on hand as fast as possible and laughing like crazy until we had been interrupted by a patient waitress who had asked if we were ready to order.

But Trish was gone now. She had died of AIDS-C months earlier, in the last decade... in another time. AIDS-C, AIDS-Three—whatever, there were many designations for the different forms of AIDS, but there were still no cures for any of the variants, and latest mutation of the disease killed in a matter of weeks after developing asymptotically for a couple of months. I had been in the Middle East on an extended consulting contract for an engineering firm building solar farms and desalination plants, and I had been unable to return to be with her when she lay dying because of travel restrictions on HIV-carriers. I had myself tested as soon as Trish had been diagnosed, and since the results were positive, I had discovered the nightmares of bureaucracy. The Middle East was even more restrictive than the West on carriers, and it had taken weeks before I had been allowed to return. First I had been forced to submit to branding—and the loss of my job. And when I had finally been able to return, it was to face a sealed coffin—an angry gesture from her parents—as it was lowered into the hard and frozen ground. She had died the day before my return because she was Synthiosporin sensitive and couldn't tolerate the newest treatment



Another Scarlet Letter

the way I could. I was grateful that she had been infected with AIDS-C and that her death had been rapid.

But it had been my fault.

I had been so busy with work that I had forgotten our tenth wedding anniversary. She had been feeling isolated and lonely to begin with, and when I forgot our anniversary, a one-sided, furious phone fight led her to give in to a one-night, impulse affair with a new neighbor who had been making passes at her for weeks. She had taken him at his word instead of insisting on his taking advantage of one of the simple, self-serve HIV testing machines scattered throughout the city.

A week later, when I was finally able to get away for a weekend, she broke down and confessed her affair. It was hard to take, but I blamed myself, and after a long talk we made up. Passionately. Then I was forced to go back overseas, unaware that I was now carrying the virus Trish had been infected with during her affair.

The worst part of it was that the man who had infected her had used a false identity and had moved shortly after the affair—before my return even—and even the all-seeing, far-reaching claws of the AIDS-Police had not been able to do a thing to find him. They had used a Reconstruction Pad and with Trish's help filled in a good likeness, but not one database had kicked out a name.

A stranger in the city—infected with AIDS-C and unbranded!

I had been shown that police portrait on my return and his face was burned into my mind and, branded or not, I had promised myself that if I found him, he would have much more to worry about than just the pursuing scarlet-uniformed Gestapo of the AIDS-Police and a Gene-Edit tattoo.

I was going to kill him because he had killed my wife and destroyed my life, and he had killed me—even if Synthiosporin would keep me alive for a decade or more.

Sudden silence caught my attention.

The young couple had stopped stock still, and they were staring at me; or rather, at the scarlet "A" emblazoned across my forehead for all the world to see. Genetically encoded and maintained, it couldn't be removed. Even make-up was useless for long. Unless a dose of light hit the photosensitive pigmentation cells regularly, the skin started secreting a mild acid that not only broke down any make-up, but also hurt! It was illegal for anyone to hide their forehead or to use concealing make-up. It wasn't a new concept, but it worked.

The girl's face was a mask of revulsion and the boy looked angry as he grabbed her hand.

"Let's get out of here. He's one of 'them'!"

I couldn't help myself and I stuck my thumbs in my ears and wiggled my fingers, making a face as I said: "Boo!"

They disappeared.

I was alone once more and I looked out over the water. It was a dirty, polluted river again, sluggishly drifting along between litter-strewn banks.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!"

The angry voice snapped me back to the present as I stumbled along Spruce with my head down. Automatically I looked up to face the glare of the man I had bumped into, but as he saw my forehead his expression changed from anger to disgust and he hastily backed away with a growl.

"Get away from me!" he snapped and turned to put as much distance between us as possible.

The City of Brotherly Love was no more. Even its celebrations had faded, as I had seen earlier in the day.

Broad Street was a hysterical madhouse. The New Year's Mummings' parade was in full swing and I studied the crowds critically... the streets, the Mummings themselves.

They all looked shabby. The colors seemed faded and the string banjos sounded tired and vaguely out of tune as they made a garish attempt to recapture a spirited part of Philly history; to maintain a fiction that the city was still as vital as it once had been.

Not that any city was.

New York, Chicago, Washington, San Francisco... all the big cities were faded and aging relics of another age. Corporate decentralization had all but killed them, but they had steadfastly refused to acknowledge their demise and still struggled to hold on to their illusions.

All except Los Angeles. The Great Quake of '99 had virtually wiped it out of existence except as a morbid tourist attraction.

Then, for just a moment, I forced myself to fight off the gloom and to look around again. Perhaps Philly had fared better than some? As a symbolic birthplace of Liberty, there was still a heart here that had been preserved to some degree. At least the people around me were trying. I got a warm and fresh soft pretzel from a vendor with a faded dollar bill that some generous soul had handed me

out of nowhere—not seeing my forehead since I kept my head down in public. I probably looked even more miserable than the many other homeless who, for a change, had company on the streets.

No one had noticed my branding yet.

I turned away suddenly as I saw a familiar scarlet uniform out of the corner of my eye. The AIDS-Police. A trim and muscular woman with mirrored glasses was making her way through the crowd holding a computer pad with a sketch and showing it to the nervous people who tried to stay away from her. They all shook their heads and stumbled away.

Then I caught a glimpse of the pad past elbows, shoulders and heads: it was him! My own quarry. If there was one thing that had kept me alive after Trish's death, it had been my determination to find our killer.

I started to move away but the officer turned and our eyes locked, even through her mirrored glasses. I couldn't see hers, but I knew they were scanning me, millimeter by millimeter to compare me with the latest list of suspects. I knew that she had to see the "A" on my



Absolute Magnitude

forehead and I forced a wan smile onto my face and bobbed my head briefly, subserviently. One does not anger the AIDS-Police.

She moved towards me and suddenly the crowd noticed us. It was as if a snow plow had cleared a path as the nearly impenetrable mass of bodies melted to either side to leave a clear space between us.

Revulsion and fear.

Complementary emotions swirled around opposite ends of the tunnel, but as she removed her chromed glasses, warm brown eyes met mine. They seemed sympathetic somehow and I was confused.

"Mr. Chalko. I see you noticed my target." Her voice was low, but somehow it carried.

I nodded, uneasily surprised that she recognized me. I didn't know what to say. The sound of string bands, street vendors and massed humanity faded as she came closer.

"Officer Linda Sawyer," she introduced herself. "I'm sorry. I know about your wife's death. As you see, we're still trying to find him."

I still couldn't speak. The streets were full of stories of Aiders victimizing suspects and Carriers.

Then she stepped up and removed a glove to touch my shoulder. Someone gasped and she bit her lip lightly, a look of embarrassment on her face. "I am sorry, whether or not you believe it. I lost my baby sister to AIDS." A deep, burning anger hardened her eyes for a moment. "She got it from a blood transfusion when she was operated on overseas. That's why I joined up. Someone has to understand. And I'm not alone."

I was confused. Ally, competitor, or a noble savior who might try to thwart my desire to bring my own justice to Trish's killer? I didn't know.

"I have a lead," she said softly. "Can we talk? I'll pretend to arrest you. I have a car nearby where we can talk. It won't look right if we just walk together."

I nodded. What could I do? She could just arrest me for real. So I held out my wrists as she read me my rights loudly and slipped the tension cuffs on. I looked around. Desperate, hunted, resigned. And I wasn't exactly faking, either.

What the hell was she up to?

She pulled me along Chestnut up to 15th Street and people around us melted away to either side until we stopped by a patrol car and she opened the back door for me to climb in. She didn't say a word as the door locked or as we pulled out into the crawling traffic. Her glasses were back on again and in the rear view mirror I could only see a reflection of a reflection as she turned onto Sansom, and then off the street into an open garage. The wide door closed behind the car and she turned to me to take off her glasses and remove my cuffs.

"We've never met," she began, "but I've been on this case from the beginning because the man who infected your wife is known to us. That's why I wanted to talk to you. His name is Mike Carter, and he used to be an Aider." She looked embarrassed again. "That's why we haven't advertised his name."

"An AIDS-Officer? What happened?"

"He found out that a girl he had been seeing must have been a Carrier. A department physical caught his infection and when he tried to get the girl to go to a corner HIV-Tester, she disappeared. So there he was: an AIDS-Officer—testing positive for the deadliest form of AIDS. He was scheduled for his branding by the department, but he took off. Since he knows the streets and the people, he knows half a

dozen suppliers of illegal Synthiosporin, and he doesn't have to go near any clinics. So far, he seems to be pretty clean—from the sporadic reports we've had—but while the Synthiosporin is better than any of the other AIDS drugs, it's still not a cure and eventually he'll die."

"But in the meantime, he apparently doesn't seem to care that he's infecting people whenever he has an affair! Like with Trish!" I couldn't help snapping at her, and I knew my face must have betrayed my plans. But she didn't seem to notice.

"Exactly. He's got to be caught and branded, to keep him from infecting others, but the police efforts don't seem to be as strong with him as with other unbranded carriers. He was on the AIDS-Force from the beginning, and he has a lot of friends."

"You don't think they're helping him, do you?"

She chewed on her lip a moment, and then shook her head. "No, no matter how close, I can't believe anyone is actually helping him—actively—but they sure aren't going all out to try to track him down, either."

"But you are?"

"Yes! I took an oath. I don't like the tactics or attitudes of a lot of my fellow officers, but I have to agree that it is vital that we identify and brand every carrier. With the new, more virulent, variant out there, we have to keep it from spreading until they come up with a cure."

I thought about what she had said earlier. "You said you had a lead. Is that why you grabbed me?"

She nodded after a moment. "And there was another reason: I need your help."

"My help?" I felt like climbing out of the car. I would almost have preferred the typical AIDS-blot. At least then I would have known where I stood.

"You don't have to say it." She sighed. "I can see what you think. But you, of all people, should see that what we do is important." She raised a hand to stop my automatic reaction. "I know, we're not doing it right. But that's why I think you'll help. I want to catch Mike and brand him. And then use him. If he's trapped anyway, I'm sure he'll be happy to air out some of the cruelty and abuses that are going on. With that, maybe we can clean house a bit and go back to what we were initially intended to do: enforce reporting of HIV infections in order to protect all of us." She reached back to take my hand.

"Please. I know you hate him and also want to see him caught. Well, that's what I want. And I also want to use him to help prevent more tragedies like yours. Is that wrong?"

An idealist! I tried to keep my face blank. If only she knew what I really wanted!

I looked out the window at the bare concrete walls of the anonymous garage we were parked in. It struck me that she didn't even consider what I might *really* want to do to Carter. Because she was such an idealist. And—I had to face reality—because I was a mousy-looking, prematurely balding, little man with glasses who looked about as dangerous as the stereotypical desk-jockey that I was. But there was a chance that she could be useful to help me find him.

But I was also realizing something else. She was right. Carter would be able to do a lot to help stop abuses if he was caught, and I had to ask myself: *could* I kill him? I couldn't even eat lobster because they were cooked alive in boiling water... to kill them.

Another Scarlet Letter

Then memories of Trish overwhelmed me.
Yes. I *could* kill him.

"All right." I looked back at her. "I'll help you," I lied smoothly, almost convincing myself. "What's the lead you were talking about?"

"Apparently he's using Jackson's Pharmacy over on Spruce—"

"Down by 10th, I know it, they bought up half the block and rebuilt the little downstairs store that used to be there. But it can't be them, though. They're in tight with your troops. They've turned in half a dozen un-branded in the last year alone."

"Only those tired of hiding."

I shook my head. "I don't buy it. Somebody would have talked."

"Nobody knew! That's the point. They run a real multi-level operation that has been impossible to detect. We just found out from an informer on the inside. He got stiffed on a shipment of black market Synthiosporin and decided to get back at them."

There was still something I didn't understand.

"So why do you need me?"

"Because our other informant disappeared. And, we also found out that Jackson has another business on the side: removing the A-Mark—"

"It can't be removed—"

"Bull! What one bio-geneticist can come up with, another one can undo. We know how to do it ourselves of course, but we just don't let it be spread around that it's possible. From time to time we find someone who has figured it out and we have to close them down—hard—but it's rare."

An uneasy feeling twisted in the pit of my stomach. "What do you mean 'close them down—hard?'"

Sawyer was silent for a long time and my gut-churning shifted into high gear. I didn't think I was going to like her answer.

"Memory-wipe," she answered finally. "We do a systematic chemo-hypnotic wipe of all associated memories regarding the technique, and even the knowledge that it is possible to do it."

"That's against the law... it has to be."

"Technically."

"How do *you* feel about it?"

She turned away and looked out the window, her voice soft and uncertain. "I don't know. On the one hand, I know it's vital to track all cases and to enforce reporting. After all, the spread has suddenly gotten out of control. The new variant is spread so much more easily and so many people are being infected that it—"

"And on the other hand?" I cut her off. "I know that first argument. I even voted for the formation of the AIDS-Police back in '11, so don't try to convince me how bad the problem is. But you're obviously not too happy about the memory-wipe."

She looked back at me and to my surprise, I saw tears in her eyes. "I really don't know! That's the problem. The solution is out of hand, I know that. The AIDS-Police are getting a reputation only slightly better than that of the Gestapo—even though most officers really aren't that bad. It's just that everyone is so scared that it is real easy to overlook abuses. That's why I'm after Carter. We have to stop the spread! All I can think of is the way my sister died and the way I let my parents down. Before they died, I promised them I'd look after Regina... and then she dies before she even turns twenty-five! She had the C-Variant, and like your wife, she couldn't tolerate Synthiosporin."

Suddenly the anger was back in her eyes and the tears seemed to turn into chipped splinters of ice as she turned to glare out the window.

I took advantage of the silence to think about what she was asking. But since she could lead me to Carter, I leaned forward and feigned concerned interest.

"I'll ask you again, why do you need me?"

She faced me again, back in control. "Isn't it obvious?"

It was. "You want me to go down there and try to have my A-Mark removed."

"Well, not like that. You wouldn't get in the door before they'd call us. No, what I'm going to do is set up some rumors that you're after Carter, to kill him because of your wife's death. I know you're mad. I saw your face before. Just build on that and you should be able to convince the people at Jackson's that you want to kill Carter. They have no love for him—he's a former AIDS-Officer. And you'll explain that you're coming to them because you heard through the grapevine that they might be able to steer you to someone who can help you get rid of the A-Mark. Mention the name Steve Armstrong. He was killed in a raid a week ago. He was organizing an illegal protest march against the AIDS-Police. You met him while drunk and bitching about the A-Mark and he told you about Jackson's."

"Why the big deal about Carter?"

"Because he's got something on them. They'll probably try to talk you out of hunting him, because he's let them know that if anything happens to him, he has information stashed about them that will get out to us. So they'll probably try to calm you down and offer to help you get rid of the A-Mark instead, and to help you get a phony I.D. I'm planting a multi-purpose bug on you—a new type that won't be detectable. In fact, I'm going to give you several. Let yourself be talked out of killing Carter, and plant some of the bugs. Hopefully the Jackson's people will contact Carter after they finish with you and we can track that. Fight them a little, but let them calm you down and convince you that your main concern is to get rid of your A-Mark so you can try to get back a more normal life—"

"That's no lie—I want to live like a human being again!" All the fury over losing everything I had ever had boiled over for a moment and Sawyer jerked back, briefly alarmed as she saw my face. I forced myself to calm down. I couldn't release my real feelings yet. Later, when I was alone with him I could let go.

Sawyer looked a little uneasy. "I forget sometimes what it must be like to live as an outcast." I fought to keep calm as she said that. *'Forget sometimes?'* Lady, you never knew! I tried to smile politely as she touched my hand.

"Will you help?"

"Sure." I forced an idiot smile onto my face because she could lead me to Carter, and I blithely asked: "So what do I do?"

She didn't answer right away but just put on her glasses and started the engine. Then she tossed a small bag into the back seat. "Here: the bugs. They are a combination of locator beacon and microphone, which will let us listen and map the layout of Jackson's. They're hidden inside small candies. After you eat this specially tagged one," she held out a single red and white piece of candy, "keep the rest in your pocket. Plant some wherever you can. I'll get in touch with you for a debriefing later." Then she reached for the dash and the garage door behind us opened to let her back out on Sansom again, after

which she drove up to 16th, turned right, and then headed back towards Market. I started to speak several times as we crawled through the traffic that had been detoured because of the Mummers, but her posture stopped me so I swallowed the piece of candy she had given me instead. Peppermint. God, I hated peppermint! I stuffed the bag into my pocket.

Sawyer's knuckles were white on the wheel and her face was a tightly sculptured mask with no trace of the slightly relaxed regret and sympathy that had briefly softened it before.

The light was red at the corner of 16th and JFK and suddenly she pulled her gun and the door popped open.

"Run! To Jackson's. The door lock popped open and you ducked out because I was threatening to kill you if you didn't tell me what dealers might be supplying illegal Synthiosporin. Now go! It'll give another reason for needing to be unbranded. Move!" she yelled.

The gun rose and I saw her mouth tighten into a harsh slash over the barrel as she took aim and her finger tightened on the trigger as I opened the door. Then, propelled by an explosion of sound, I threw myself out the car door and hit the ground rolling.

And now I was here. Jackson's was looming over me and I fought the urge to just run—Sawyer be damned! But I couldn't. This was my best chance to get Carter. No colorful sentinels were waiting so I moved closer. Was it my imagination, or did the pulled-down blinds on the second floor shift a little? The downstairs was closed off, and I bypassed the steps up to the new main entrance and went up the aging make-shift ramp that had been installed because of the decades-old Americans With Disabilities Act. It had obviously not been maintained well since, and the worn and peeling non-skid surface creaked and shifted alarmingly under me.

At the top of the ramp, the pharmacy door squealed open to the accompaniment of a soft cheery tinkling from the little bell overhead. A double warning of visitors? I stepped into a cozily warm shop permeated with that unmistakable 'pharmacy' smell, and all at once I felt as if I was being watched. Every glittering bottle and colorful cardboard box seemed to conceal inspecting eyes. There was an old man with a wild shock of snow-white hair behind the counter, busy with something behind a chest-high barrier. I saw his shoulders heave and heard rattling and tapping glassy and plastic sounds as he... what, *measured medicine*? Old-fashioned glasses were perched on the edge of his nose and looked ready to fall off, except for the thin gold chain that wound around his neck.

"I'll be with you in a moment, sir," he called absently without looking up. I nodded to him, blinking at a sudden flash of light from somewhere. He ignored me and didn't seem to notice. So I just paced around restlessly, hearing the floorboards creak under me. This was it? An underground supply house of Synthiosporin for the unbranded? A den of high-tech genetic engineers working on removing A-Marks?

Norman Rockwell would have felt at home!

"All right, get back here!" Suddenly the little old man was next to me grabbing my arm with an iron grip to pull me towards a wall that suddenly swung back to reveal a well-lit hallway going towards the back of the building. A husky African-American man about my age was waiting and my brusque host called ahead.

"He's clean, Jack. No transmitters, bugs or weapons. I.D. is positive based on retinal print. Any signs of the Aiders?"

Jack shook his head. "Nah, the Aider he got away from is burning up the airways bitching about him getting past the patrols, but they still haven't gotten down this far."

The light! A camera. I looked back at the innocent pharmacy with new respect. Retinal prints and electronic inspection without me even knowing about it. No wonder Sawyer had wanted to use a new type of bug. My stomach growled and I burped the taste of peppermint.

"Come on!" Jack grabbed me and pulled me into the tunnel and the wall snapped shut behind me. "You better have a good story. We're taking a hell of a risk bringing you back here without a more thorough check. Why the hell are you suddenly so hot with the Aiders?"

I swallowed, forgetting all my carefully rehearsed presentations. "I... I heard you supply Synthiosporin to some without reporting to the AIDS-Council, and I also heard some rumors that you might be able to remove my—"

"Heard from who?" He grabbed my shirt and glared down at me. Think about Carter! Think about Trish!

"Steve Armstrong." I didn't have to fake the nervousness in my voice as I remembered Sawyer's briefing. "He said you might be able to take care of this." I jabbed at my forehead. "And as for why, that's my business!" I did my best to glare back and for a moment we stood there, tensely locked eye to eye, until Jack's mouth wavered and he started smiling.

"Welcome brother." He let go of my shirt and smoothed out the crumpled cloth. "Sorry, man, but we've got to be careful. The Aiders are everywhere. We know about you. We've been getting rumors for a while now that you're hunting for someone special." His mouth clenched briefly.

Sawyer! She had not just 'started' spreading rumors any more than she had just happened to 'find' me earlier. She had to have planned this some time ago, I realized. Maybe from the very beginning, since she had admitted to being on my case from the start. I had been set up!

"We have a problem with Carter, too," Jack went on, "and I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you to go easy for a while."

Careful, I warned myself. *You don't know about it.* "A problem?"

"He's blackmailing us into helping him, and we don't know what precautions he might have taken."

I kept quiet as if I was thinking, and then looked over at him. "And if anything happens to him, then any information he might have hidden could get out?" *What the hell did I care?* But I kept my face blandly curious.

Jack nodded. "Exactly. *If* anything was to happen."

There was the subtlest undertone of menace in his words that contradicted his bland smile. It was such an intricate verbal ballet. He knew what I intended, I knew he knew, and he knew I knew he knew... but neither of us would admit it. But he left me no doubt about knowing that I would have to change my plans. Or so he thought.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "But come on, we'll give you some time to think about it and to get cleaned up. If you have to live with leaving Carter alone, the least we can do is to take care of that A-Mark for you. Then you can get a job—"

"So I can pay for black-market Synthiosporin, since I can't buy it without a legitimate registered A-Mark," I cut in a little sourly.

Another Scarlet Letter

Jack shrugged. "Well, we have to make a living, too. Black-market Synthiosporin is a little more expensive—"

"Which expense is then passed on to illegal buyers. Nice operation." I could have kicked myself. *Don't criticize!* "I'm sorry. Everything's just happening so fast."

"I know, I know. Relax. We have a real good job placement service, too." He laughed. "After all, if we don't keep you working, we can't keep you buying. And we don't inflate the price too badly, or people would just turn themselves in. And us, too. We strike a balance." He shrugged. "What the market will bear. And look at the benefits: you'll be able to live normally again."

I was instantly suspicious as it dawned on me what he was offering. "What about records? All computer files show that I'm a carrier --"

"—and they will be erased. We have people in places who can arrange it. People who were Carriers—"

"Are Carriers, you mean?"

"Are, were, what's the difference? Our doctors will find you clean and Synthiosporin will keep you asymptomatic for at least another ten years as long as you keep taking it. It's not a cure, but it's a start. And if you're careful not to kiss anyone without a special mouthwash first, and use condoms and other special precautions we'll explain, there's little danger of you contaminating anyone else. There's even a seventy percent chance you'll live another twenty years or so if you follow our homeopathic regimen of supplemental vitamins and herbs. And when you do die, it will be very fast as things catch up with you. If you stay carefully with our doctors, and our coroners, no one will ever know. We're very well organized. And if you take a trip, let us know and we'll put you in touch with a list of safe doctors at your destination. We're just a small part of Bio-Aid Pharmaceutical and we take care of our customers, for just a small annual service charge."

I stared at him, considering what he was saying. A normal life, almost—just a bit abbreviated—in exchange for paying extra for my medicine, and being a bit careful.

All at once I could almost forget Carter as the enormity of what Jack was blithely talking about hit me: computer records altered, medical records falsified, jobs, and normalcy! I also felt a sick twisting inside as I thought about what else he said: A small part of Bio-Dyne Pharmaceutical? That was an international conglomerate. I nervously asked: "Just how big is your operation?"

Jack smiled subtly and repeated, "We're pretty organized," as he stopped in front of a door and opened it. "In here. There's a bathroom in the back with a first aid kit where you can wash up and put something on those cuts. You look like hell!" His grin removed any offense. "And then if you'll wait here, a nurse will be in in a while to take some skin and blood samples so we can begin the process of removing your A-Mark—"

"Which will cost how much?" I interrupted cynically.

"As I said, no need to worry. In this case, call it a complementary treat as thanks for not causing problems with Carter. As for the Synthiosporin, you won't see a bill for that until we have you working again."

I smiled uneasily. "Thanks." I suddenly remembered the bag in my pocket and pulled it out, pretending to down another one of the small 'candies'. I offered the bag to him and he peered in.



"Peppermint?" he asked hopefully. I nodded. "Thanks. I love peppermint. Mind if I take a couple?"

"No, go right ahead." I felt weak as he grabbed a handful like I had hoped and dropped them in his pocket after popping one in his mouth. I laughed. "Gee, I guess I'm going to learn what it feels like to be a criminal—on easy credit."

He chuckled and clapped my shoulder. "Good, very good. Keep your sense of humor. Now relax. It'll be a while, I'm afraid. We weren't expecting you. But there are some magazines and such. We have better facilities, but they are in more secure areas—"

"And I'm not quite cleared for those areas, yet, I take it."

"Exactly. You understand." He waved and slipped back out the door, leaving me in an antiseptic room that looked as if it had been stamped out of some generic 'doctor's office waiting room' catalog. Semi-comfortable vinyl bench seats and low tables—all in various industrial-neutral colors—were scattered around while inoffensively bland fusion-jazz music played softly in the background. Magazines, ever so slightly out of date, were spread across the tables—a few publications still resisted the trend to go all-electronic. After cleaning up in the bathroom, I took a seat and picked up a three week-old *Lifetimes* magazine and leafed absently through an article on the changing demographics of the work place.

Suddenly the door opened and a furtive figure slipped in. I froze and my hands clenched as I realized who it was—Carter!

He was holding a small box and waving it around, and after a moment, he nodded.

"All clean, except your bugs and they missed those. Good. They're not worried about you. We have some time because the nurse is busy with another refugee."

He dropped onto one of the low seats—totally oblivious to my reaction to him—and leaned back with a sigh. "Damn, I'm tired. This is running me ragged. What's she like, by the way?" He glanced over with a grin. "I hear she's a real looker. Is she?"

I was totally confused, and it must have showed because he straightened and slapped his knees.

"Shit! I'm sorry. I forgot: you're an outsider. But we needed you to draw them out. They only trust me so far, but you're perfect. Welcome to the game." He held out a hand and grinned.

His smiling face unlocked weeks of building rage and I exploded out of my seat to grab him by the throat.

"Welcome to the game"? What the fuck are you talking about? You killed my wife!"

Gasping for breath, Carter tried to pry loose my death-grip as he managed to force out a confused: "What do you mean: 'killed your wife'? Didn't she—"

"No, Mr. Chalko," a new voice suddenly interrupted us. "Please don't kill him." It was a cold, hard voice that belied the words... Sawyer's. "I'd like to reserve that pleasure for myself! On your knees, Carter!"

My grip on him eased as we stared at the intruder standing there. It was Sawyer, but in plain clothes. She looked harmless and utterly feminine in her street clothes—until you looked in her eyes and at the unwavering gun in her grip; an old silencer-equipped semi-automatic pistol aimed squarely at the ex-Aider's forehead. She didn't take her eyes off him.

"It's too bad we weren't allowed to make direct contact or I could have spared Chalko a lot of pain."

He was looking at her with a strange expression. "Do I know you?"

"No, but you knew my baby sister: Regina Michaels. People say we looked a lot alike."

He hissed and spun out of my grasp to face the wall. "Shit!" Turning back to her he croaked, "I didn't know." Rubbing his throat he glared briefly at me before repeating, "I swear, I didn't know," to Sawyer.

I was looking back and forth trying to figure out what they were talking about, until I remembered what she had said when we had first met. Then I started to put it together and I took a guess: "He's the one who got contaminated blood, not your sister. And he infected—"

"—her and gave her AIDS-C!" Sawyer finished angrily. "Think about how you felt when you thought he had killed your wife—that's almost what I've been living with!" Her eyes were narrow slits. "Ten years ago my parents were in a car crash, on the way home with presents for Regina's 15th birthday party! My mother was killed instantly, but my father lived long enough to make me promise to look out for my sister. And for ten years I've been there for her, until *he*," her finger tightened on the trigger, "killed her! So like you, I made my decision about what to do about it."

The gun was rising slowly as she focused on Carter, but it had just dawned on me what she had said and I couldn't help moving closer until the gun shifted to cover me.

I stopped. "What did you mean 'when I thought he had killed my wife'?"

"That's what I tried to tell you," Carter broke in with a sigh. "I'm *not* the one who infected your wife. A special task force is still looking for him. She," he threw Sawyer a sour look, "was supposed to brief you fully about us switching the suspect drawings from the very beginning when she *recruited* you to help us." He stressed the words bitterly.

I was confused and looked at Sawyer who just raised an eyebrow.

"Let's just say I thought your performance would be that much more convincing if you thought you were actually after the man who infected your wife." She didn't look in the least bit sorry. "I couldn't take a chance that the Jackson people wouldn't buy your story and try a voice stress analyzer on you. This way you really believed you were after your wife's killer. And I knew Carter would contact you, because that was the plan from the beginning—"

"And that way you could be sure to catch up to him yourself." Now it was clear why she had wanted to be sure I had the locator beacons and microphones with me.

"Exactly. We already had a rough lay-out of this area from his reports since these aren't part of the secure rooms, and I knew how to get in here, but I had to wait till you were alone together in an accessible area."

"So you cooked all this up to kill him?" I couldn't believe how neatly I had been manipulated. Accidental meeting up by the Mummies indeed. She had probably had a tail on me all along and stepped out for me to find her.

She shrugged. "Tell me that isn't what you were planning?" I couldn't argue with that as she went on:

Another Scarlet Letter

"Still, he may not be the one who infected your wife, but he might well be—and *he did kill Regina!* He should have kept after her after he knew she had been at risk! Maybe if she had found out sooner—"

"It wouldn't have mattered." Another heavy sigh from Carter interrupted us. He didn't take his eyes off Sawyer's gun as he addressed her quietly, but speaking to both of us as he explained:

"By the time I found out, she had already been infected for weeks. Too late to do anything." He looked over at me.

"I had a transfusion last year after a severe gunshot wound, and because of a foul-up at the blood-bank no one realized that the blood was infected. At the same time, I was having an affair with Regina. I met her at last year's New Year's Eve party when she was still married to a patrol officer in the 9th District. They were having problems because he was abusive, and she just wanted someone to talk to who understood cops. We became friends, and then after they got divorced," he shrugged, "well, one thing led to another. Being an Aider is a lonely job." He looked suddenly tired. "It's not often you meet someone who isn't either scared, disgusted or outraged by what we do."

Sawyer's finger tightened briefly on the trigger, but she kept control and relaxed as Carter continued.

"Like I said," he looked intently at her, "I didn't know. A routine physical caught my infection some weeks later, but by then it was too late. For both of us. I was put on Synthiosporin and suspended from active duty. I warned Regina to get tested—and yes, I should have followed up—but I was in the middle of making plans to go undercover before I got branded. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up—"

"So you just forgot about Regina—"

"Yes," he conceded. "I *am* sorry. But not only was I feeling sorry for myself, and angry, but I was thinking about the risk to thousands of people a year, and I'm afraid I lost touch of one important person. I should have made sure someone followed up on Regina's case, but like I said, it really wouldn't have made a difference. It *was* too late."

Sawyer's face was blank and unmoved. "You don't *know* that," she insisted in a broken voice, her mouth tightening to a tight slash as she raised the gun again.

I moved closer again to stop her. "So how did I get dragged into this?" *Keep them talking*, I told myself. There was supposedly a nurse coming.

I didn't know why I was suddenly so concerned with Carter's welfare, but for some strange reason I couldn't stand by and just watch him get killed. Besides, maybe he could help me find the real source of Trish's infection.

And then what?

But I had more pressing concerns. Sawyer had backed off to leave herself room, and the gun was trained halfway between Carter and myself, ready to shoot either one of us.

Carter looked like he was trying to gauge his chances of jumping her, but he had relaxed as I asked my question. "You owe him that,"

he offered. "Frankly, I'd also like to know how you got him involved."

"It was your idea," she snapped.

"Yes, but my idea was for a consenting and compensated volunteer!" he shot back.

Sawyer's trigger-finger tightened briefly, and then relaxed as she looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "The idea was to find a needy volunteer who had lost someone very close," she explained. "And someone who was also infected himself, and who would have the motivation to help, in exchange for money and free Synthiosporin—"

"And then you would spread a story about him being after the person who was responsible and set him up to go undercover," I finished. "Just like you did with me. Why?"

"Because they'll never entirely trust me," Carter answered. "I thought I could get in here, but too many people were suspicious and I had to resort to subtle blackmail."

"But you were perfect," Sawyer added to me. "Out of the country much of the time, very much in love with your wife, financially destroyed by losing your job and paying for her treatments—"

"—and a mild-mannered engineer who wouldn't scare a mouse," I went on, getting her point.

"Exactly. Your personal, work, and home situations were tailor-made for this, and the computer spit out your name in response to the parameters we fed in."

I felt a little queasy as I realized what that revealed about computer monitoring of peoples' private lives, but Sawyer went on obliviously:

"Carter came up with the plan, and since I was on the team that set it all up and you were out of the country, it was no problem to make the suspect picture switch without you knowing about it."

"So you just let me rot and build up my anger while you started the rumors going about me being out for vengeance? The mouse who started to roar once he lost his spouse. Who would suspect me of being a plant?"

"Especially when you didn't know you were one," she confirmed, losing interest in me and focusing her aim on Carter.

"You can't do it!" I shouted.

"Watch me."

I reached out and grabbed the rigid immovable rod of her arm. "Look, I know how you feel, but listen to me, please. We've got to help him. Did you listen to what these people are doing? I mean, really listen, not just wait to hear Carter contact me? Imagine that multiplied by similar operations in every major city, and then think about what kind of an AIDS problem we might really be facing."

"Spell it out for me," she snapped, but the iron-hard and tensed muscles under her jacket relaxed ever-so-slightly and the gun drooped a little as I took a breath and started to describe the scope of what I had learned.



Absolute Magnitude

It scared the crap out of me as I laid it out, extrapolating it beyond a mere city-wide operation. Carter's eyes grew wide as he listened. He had suspected some of it, but even he had not known all of it.

But Linda was still not really absorbing it all and she just glared hungrily at Carter, her grip tightening and the gun slowly rising again.

"Don't!" I stepped towards her. "If he dies, they'll just pull the plug on this place and relocate. Don't you think they have contingency plans?"

The gun swung towards me, an extension of the hollow and wounded glare that marred what under other circumstances would have been a beautiful face. I swallowed and stared at the unwavering black hole in the silencer's tip as images flashed through my mind: explosions of sound... pain and the taste of blood in my mouth... the harsh stinging of my palms after I scraped the gritty concrete... exploding glass and screaming pedestrians who dove to the side in panic.

The pain of losing Trish. The incredible loneliness; the gaping hole in my chest as I stared at her flower-draped coffin being lowered into the ground.

How many more people would face this pain? How many people were walking around with apparently clean bills of health, because of Jackson's and other outfits like it? And how many people might be unwittingly infected or infecting others because they didn't take all the precautions they should—the uninfected who thought the absence of an "A" meant someone was safe, or the disguised carriers who were weary of the many careful precautions?

I continued forward, ignoring the barrel that tracked up and centered somewhere between my eyes until cold, hard steel pressed against the bridge of my nose. There was a faint smell of gunpowder teasing my nose—actually a rather pleasant smell, I realized—and I took a deep breath.

"No. You can't do this." I ran out of words for a moment until I saw what was missing. Remembering her first name, finally, I reached up to touch the gun lightly. "You're a cop, Linda. I'm not a suspect. Are you going to shoot an innocent man? If you kill him, you'll have to kill me, too." Strangely enough, I wasn't afraid.

"And part of you really doesn't want to kill anyone," I added. "You're angry and hurt, but you've had several chances to shoot and didn't. Almost as if you wanted to be talked out of it—to be given an excuse not to shoot. You have to let her go, Linda. Don't ruin everything in some useless search for vengeance."

It was as if someone else was talking, and I felt my eyes fill with tears as I finally accepted the truth in what I had said, and realized how much Linda and I had in common. I also had to learn to let go.

Then there was a long silence until the cold pressure of metal starting shivering and then eased all at once—almost throwing me off balance because I had been leaning into her gun to strengthen our bond—and I heard a faint click as the hammer was eased back. The gun was gone and I realized that my eyes had been unfocused, unseeing. But as I wiped them, I was able to really see her. She was also hurting and afraid, and as I reached out to take her into my arms to hold her tight, I felt her body shiver with small, barely perceptible sobs. Carter was staring, his eyes flicking nervously from side to side.

"I've got to get her out of here." He saw my expression but shook his head. "I'll be okay." He took her arm as I released her. "And so will she. She's a cop." He ejected the clip out of her gun, and the

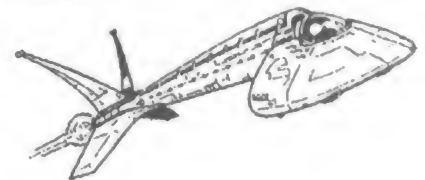
round in the chamber, as he took it from her limp hand and slipped it into his pocket. "We've got to clear out of here. If you're willing to stay with this for a while..." His eyes were pleading, and I nodded. "Just cooperate with them and we'll contact you. In the meantime, keep listening and spreading the bugs and I'll be in touch with you. Learn as much as you can."

"I'm sorry!" Sawyer turned to me briefly, her eyes still brimming with tears as Carter pulled her towards the door. "Really, I am!"

His hand clamped on my arm briefly. "And so am I! I promise that I'll see about getting you pulled off the case as soon as possible. And we'll get you the money you were supposed to have been paid."

There were a hundred more things unsaid and so many more to be resolved, but there wasn't time, and I squeezed his hand briefly. "Later. Now, go, get out of here."

They disappeared and I sat back down to leaf through the worn glossy pages one more time, though I only saw Trish's face as I waited for the sound of footsteps.



Absolute Magnitude

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Absolute Magnitude has opened the doors for readers with disabilities by offering an accessible electronic version of the magazine on computer disk. Our goal is to ensure that everyone who wants to read the magazine has an equal chance. *Absolute Magnitude* is the first Science Fiction magazine to become available in this format.

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Steven Sawicki is perhaps the best known reviewer in the small press field. He has done reviews for dozens of small magazines including *Scavenger's Newsletter*. He has probably read more magazines than anyone else on the planet.

Far Haze and Distant Thunder

by Steven Sawicki

The Small Press is: (Choose all that apply) A.) An offensive play utilized by the Minnesota Fighting Midgets basketball team. B.) The machine used by printers when the Big Press is otherwise tied up. C.) The device used when the grape crop comes in less than expected. D.) A collection of magazines, chapbooks, books, one-sheets, fanzines, and newsletters that otherwise nearly defies definition. If you chose A you win! Since this is a magazine which focuses on fiction, however, we'll be utilizing the D option.

Talebones #8, Patrick & Honna Swenson, eds., 10531 SE 250th Pl. #104., Kent, WA 98031, \$4.50, 4/\$16, 8/\$30, Canadians add \$1 per issue, other foreigners add \$2 per issue, 68 pgs. Aliens should consult with their embassies for exchange rates and remember, never send cash through hyperspace.

A magazine makes its first impression with the cover. As the small press is a birthing ground for writers and poets, so too is it a maelstrom force for artists. This issue of *Talebones* has cover art by Chris Whitlow. It's the kind of cover that makes you want to pick up the magazine and read the story it illustrates. Assuming, of course, that it does indeed illustrate a story and is not just a pretty picture. Not that there's anything wrong with pretty pictures of and by themselves, but I have always been of the camp that a cover should draw you into a magazine. I believe this is best done when the cover is linked to an internal work. The illustrations inside of the magazine are also very well done and include work by Whitlow, Bob Hobbs, Tom Simonton, and Paul Swenson. Not being an artist myself, I can't comment on the styles or the techniques; only on whether or not I liked them and whether or not they added or detracted to the work they accompanied and to the magazine as a whole. As far as *Talebones* is concerned the art is generally a real plus.

Of course, one rarely buys a magazine for the art; it's the words we're after and if they aren't worth the journey or the expense, regardless of how pretty the scenery has been, then the trip's been wasted. *Talebones* is a magazine of Science Fiction and Dark Fantasy which

seems like an odd pairing until one remembers that *F&SF* worked the SF/Fantasy/Mystery combo for many successful decades. In any case, the issue I have in front of me contains a pretty excellent collection of short stories by some very talented individuals. Rather than go into too much detail about individual tales—I get the magazines in the Summer, read them by August, write about them by September to be published even later than that, which means we're looking at a minimal six-month lag. Let me tell you that this issue, which is pretty representative as far as content and mix, contains seven short stories, four poems, an interview, letters, a music review column, a book review column, an Internet column, and an editorial. It can be noted that beginning with the issue after this one, the Internet column fades to be replaced by a mixed media column and a new review column will be added.

Talebones is a magazine worth investigating. You won't find the experimental or the odd or the 'almost rans' here. What you will find is good, solid fiction produced by writers who are sitting on the cusp of pro publication. *Talebones* is a nice package; great art, good editing, and wonderful writing which reflects an editorial selection process based in a belief in straightforward storytelling.

I've been reading, reviewing, and watching the small press for almost 20 years now and while I consider myself to have an understanding of what the small press is, I do not consider myself an expert. In a nutshell, the small press is many things to many people and you can wallow in argument about exactly what it is and what it is not and what should be included and what should be left out. For my purpose I will take a fairly broad definition which goes something like this: the Small Press is a collection of individual publications (magazines, chapbooks, books, etc.), typically without national distribution and typically not profit making and typically with circulations of less than 10,000.

For many years there have been a number of different distinctions or labels to categorize

a particular work. There are the pro press, the semi-pro press, fanzine, the small press, little magazine, chapbook, vanity press and newsletter to choose from. The lines between some of these categories were extremely thin if almost non-existent. For example, one describes the difference between the pro press and the semi-pro press by utilizing production schedule, pay rate, distribution and circulation. This makes *Analog* a pro press, *Aboriginal SF* a semi-pro, and *Space and Time* a small press. *Century* is small press even though it pays high rates, is nationally distributed, and approaches the 10,000 circulation figure because it produces less than an issue a year. Oftentimes semi-pro magazines (and even some small press magazines) have better content and better packaging than existing pro press members. All in all, it can get pretty confusing, assuming, of course, that you are one who cares about such things. Still, such rankings may determine the places you can find a magazine. In general, pro press mags will be available any place you find any other nationally distributed magazine. Semi pro can generally be found in the same places but not all the time and not every issue. Small press mags can occasionally be found in these places as well, but it is more hit and miss.

Hardboiled #23, Gary Lovisi, ed., Gryphon Publications, P. O. Box 280209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, \$7, 6/\$35 (Outside US 6/\$42), 104 pgs.

Hardboiled refers as much to attitude as it does to a particular segment of a genre. *Hardboiled* is a detective too long on the downhill ride. *Hardboiled* is a gumshoe working the seedy side of town because he jones for the thrill. *Hardboiled* is a dame with a plan, an alibi and a cold .45. *Hardboiled* is mostly hard men and women taking things into their own hands, and if they sometimes don't win or if things don't turn out exactly as planned, well, that's life on the *Hardboiled* side of town. Think of Mickey Spillane, who just happens to be in this issue and you've got *Hardboiled* pretty much down pat.

Gary Lovisi, editor of *Hardboiled*, has almost single handedly worked to keep this type of writing alive in the magazine/short story

Absolute Magnitude

format. The fact that he's been at it for better than five years speaks volumes to his love for this form of fiction. That passion is evident in the fiction that *Harboiled* contains; in the art, as well as the non-fiction articles. Lovisi is an editor who gets it done on time and who produces a consistent product with each issue. Chances are if you like one issue of this magazine you'll like them all. Lovisi also publishes a book line which reprints British gangster novels from the days of pulp crime writing.

Each issue of *Hardboiled* is a balanced mix of fiction and non-fiction. The fiction comes from such names as Richard Lupoff, Harlan Ellison, Steve Rasnick Tem and Lovisi himself. The non-fiction includes tributes to writers of the past and present, surveys of publishers or particular types of writing styles, reviews of books and/or movies, and the occasional piece on some aspect of the business of crime writing.

I probably should mention that this magazine is damn near perfect for those of you who eschew political correctness. I'll mention as well that, because *Hardboiled* is such a rare beast, Lovisi is able to attract some pretty big name authors. These names live up to their reps and issue after issue of this magazine is filled with hard-hitting action and graphic storytelling. Sometimes the plot suffers for the setting, but the entertainment value is rarely compromised. Assuming you enjoy crime fiction, you'll love *Hardboiled*. If you're not sure exactly what crime fiction is or whether or not you enjoy it, then there's no better place to get your feet wet.

As much fun as arguing definitions is, you don't need to know any at all to make some wise decisions concerning where and how to get involved in the small press. What you do need to know is the following: what's the name of the magazine; what's in it; who's in it; is it any good in terms of consistency, content, and editorial direction; is it getting better or at least maintaining it's level of quality; how can you get it; and what will it cost you. I will strive to provide some of that information for you in this and upcoming columns. You can do yourself a world of good as well if you just remember a couple of simple truths. 1) Editors are liars. Perhaps not intentionally but when it comes to their magazines they are overly optimistic and Pollyanna. If they say they produce quarterly, you should figure 3 issues or less per year. If they say annually, figure 18 months. If they promise an issue is coming soon, expect that

the magazine has already folded. This is actually no big deal unless you've just written a check for a two year subscription. Since I expect that none of you has money to burn you should purchase the first 3 to 4 issues on a per issue basis. It may cost you a bit more, but you'll only lose the cost of one issue instead of a full subscription when the mag fails to show up in your mailbox. Besides, this is a great way to see whether or not you really like a mag. 2) Most magazines, regardless of who the editor or publisher is or how professional anything appears, fold sometime in the first three issues. 3) There are places where the small press can be watched so if you plan on getting involved it might be worthwhile to consider utilizing these places. They are: *Scavenger's Newsletter*, *Heliocentric Network*, and *Inklings*. See the end of this column for addresses. All three of these are essentially market listings for writers but they also provide a wealth of information about the small press in terms of what magazines are coming out, what magazines are silent and what magazines have folded. 4) Most small press editors and publishers are genuine in their efforts. In fact, I would probably say that 99% of them truly want to produce a quality product. They are, however, often lacking in such skills as marketing, cash flow analysis, time management, layout, and contract law. These are the things that often kill magazines, along with optimism.

Dreams and Nightmares #48, David C. Kopaska-Merkel, ed., 1300 Kicker Rd., Tuscaloosa, AL 35404, \$1, 6/\$10, lifetime/\$100, 20 pgs.

D&N is one of the longest running publications dedicated to poetry of the fantastic. Not being a huge poetry lover myself (frankly, if it don't rhyme, I ain't got the time, it's like free verse makes me nervous) I tend to veer away from such offerings. When I review larger, fiction oriented publications I can usually either gloss over the poetical content by ignoring it, giving it brief mention or picking out a single piece to praise if one is found to be so worthy. That being the case, I am somewhat bemused that I continue to not only read *D&N* but to enjoy it. I've been doing so for almost eight years now and Editor K-M never fails to put together an issue that pleases. Additionally, Editor K-M dedicates each issue to strangeness, such as the issues containing nothing but zero or one word poems (titles can be of any length and visual poems are accepted).

The pages of *D&N* may contain three or four offerings from different poets or they may contain parody, or text poems or short, short stories. Each issue also contains a couple of pieces of art and it is obvious that Editor K-M puts as much effort into art selection as he does into selecting his poetry. K-M has the ability to not only pull the best from the best but to attract new talent and make it dance. This is a difficult thing since poetry is so hard to place and poets so tempestuous by nature. The fact that *D&N* has been coming out for over eleven years now only makes it all the more amazing. High quality, fabulous content, great price, what more could you ask for? At some point in the future people will ask where all the talented poets got their start and a singular place will garner all the attention. *D&N* is that place and it's a place you're not only welcomed to visit but that you'll want to return to issue after issue. And remember, this from a person who admits to not being a poetry lover.

As you surely can tell by now, the small press is an extremely diverse beast. Essentially, if you can think of a topic you can find a small press offering catering to it. Interested in cemeteries and death practices as fictional devices? Try the *Funerary Journal*. Interested in surreal takes on fiction? Try the *Silver Web*. Interested in a twisted view of politics, culture and media? Try *Non-Stop*. Like your SF the old fashioned way? Try *Space & Time*. Like old fashioned story telling? Try *Plot*. Swashbuckling? *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*. Mysteries? *Red Herring Mystery*. Vampires? Hmmm, I know there's a vampire mag out there somewhere... *Dreams of Decadence*, sister mag to this publication. Werewolves? *Shapechangers*. City based surreal fiction? *The Urbanite*. Sick horror? *Twisted Tales*. And on and on and on. The difficulty lies not so much in trying to find something in particular but in trying to sift through the massive amount of offerings that are out there and find something that is worth picking up and worth staying with.

Palace Corbie, Wayne Edwards, ed., Merrimack Books, PO Box 83514, Lincoln, NE 68501-3514, \$12.95, 330 pgs.

Palace Corbie is an annual anthology packaged like an oversized paperback. It's a horror anthology by nature and it attracts writers from all directions. Additionally, Editor Edwards makes one thing very clear, if not in saying so than by layout: words are important. Except for the covers, which are

Far Haze and Distant Thunder

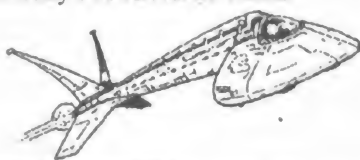
typically awe-inspiring and almost a visual tale in themselves, there is no art. Other than a brief editorial, generally a page or less, there are no other editorial intrusions. What remains is page after page of fiction by some of the field's best. Inside you'll find work by established masters, new pros, small press writers on the cusp of prodom, and small press discoveries. There is some poetry to break the fiction but not much. *Palace Corbie* is, by nature and by design, a collection of fiction. It is also worthwhile to note that each issue has increased not only in size (and, naturally, cost) but in quality as well.

Edwards has loosely chosen the general theme of personal horror to hang his hat on. He has a predilection for stories which focus on individual weakness and the curse of action too late or nonexistent. Edwards has a great editorial eye and a good flair for composition, placing stories in the anthology in such an order that the positioning itself almost becomes a tale. Edwards is not afraid to try something new and unique. The issue I have in front of me has an entire section of stories with the same title. Edwards gave writers the task of producing work based on a static title and then sat back, almost in fear, to see what would arrive. I don't know why he worried about getting too much of the same thing, knowing writers and how whacked they generally are. What he did get is a collection of stories that are almost frightening in their diversity. This one section is worth the price of admission.

One of the big benefits of *Palace Corbie* is that you are buying an issue in print so you know you'll get what you send for. There are also a couple of back issues available so you can go in that direction as well, assuming you find the fiction to your liking. I should mention that the fictional content here is not slash and gore, but more the horror of situation. It is the horror of the chase rather than being caught, more the horror of what happens in one's head rather than what happens to one's head. It is the quiet horror waiting for an unleashing scream and the mute horror of injustice and infamy. Ultimately it is the horror that we, and I mean the 'normal' we and not the 'psychopathic' we, inflict on each other and upon ourselves. *Palace Corbie* is the repository of such horrors and the place where talented writers gather on a regular basis to set such things free.

Well, that brings us to the end of this column. The focus here will be mainly on those magazines that I expect to be around for more than an issue or two. This time we looked at some pretty stalwart titles. Next time we may become a bit more adventurous and look at

some of the newer picks, always keeping in mind that predicting the small press is like letting people bring shotguns to a hockey game—you never know when a slapshot will turn to buckshot. We've also barely touched the surface in looking at what the small press has potential to be—breeding ground for authors, publishers, editors, wannabes and also a place of walls, self imposed limits, big fish/small pond syndrome, and the dangerous inflating ego. If you'd like to get in touch with me, you can do so care of the editor here or you can reach me by email at sfreviewer@bigfoot.com. If you're an editor and you've got something you'd like reviewed, do four things: produce the best product you can; produce said product for at least 18 months; produce at least 4 issues; and send a copy to me, care of this magazine. For those of you looking for more information between columns, check out: *Scavenger's Newsletter*, Janet Fox, ed., 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523-1329 \$2, 6/\$8.50, 12/\$17; *Heliocentric Network*, Lisa Jean Bothell, ed., 17650 1st Ave. S., Box 291, Seattle, WA 98148 \$3, 6/\$18, (\$4, 6/\$24 International); *Inkings*, <http://www.inkspot.com/~ohi/inkspot/>, free, biweekly e-newsletter for writers.





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Continued from editorial page

will cover the semiprofessional and small press fields. Until now, there simply hasn't been an outlet of any real size covering these magazines. We want to support these magazine, and the best way that we know of is to let people know about them. We will not accept any paid advertisements from any of the magazines featured in Mr. Sawicki's column, and next issue we will even start giving each semiprofessional magazine reviewed here free classified ad space. We are not doing this for monetary reasons. We want to help usher in a new Golden Age. It's not about money, it's never been about money. We love this field, it's as simple as that. While others might spend their time crying about the demise of Science Fiction our time will be better spent building it up.

To that end we are also now offering an adaptive version of *Absolute Magnitude*. This version will allow people with disabilities an equal chance to join us in this coming Golden Age. The adaptive electronic text version is compatible with MS DOS and Windows platforms; and includes full-text versions of each fact article and work of fiction found in the magazine. The electronic edition of *Absolute Magnitude* includes a shareware text browser, a file reading utility specially designed for users of adaptive equipment. ReadIt is a speech-friendly text browser, celebrated among users with vision impairments who utilize speech output systems to read files and access personal computers. The pricing structure for the adaptive version will be the same as for the print version. The future is here and we believe that everyone should be able to take advantage of it.

The next time that you hear someone complaining about the state of the Science Fiction field, ask them what they're doing about it. It's time that everyone in Science Fiction got off their collective asses and stopped whining about the future. Are you worried about magazines? Then subscribe to a couple of them. Are you worried about books? Then buy a few of them. Do you work in the industry? Then help support others in the industry through you ad budget, or by networking. Perhaps when looked at in the short term this money may not look well spent, But look at the long term. A strong Science Fiction field will pay dividends for decades to come.

There's a glorious future waiting for us out there, you just have to have the courage to reach out for it. We have the courage, come along for the ride!



Hal Clement was born in Massachusetts in 1920. He has been a science lover from early childhood, at least partly as a result of a 1930 *Buck Rogers* panel in which villains were "headed for Mars, 47 million miles away." He majored in Astronomy at Harvard, and has Master's Degrees in Education and in Chemistry. He is considered the father of hard science fiction, and his novel *Mission of Gravity* is generally accepted as the best hard sf novel ever written. This is his fifth appearance in our pages.

Oh, Natural

by Hal Clement

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Jaques D'Orrey wriggled a little farther forward and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. The Maine sunlight was merely warm, the sea breeze a hundred and fifty meters up was almost cool, but the nearly skin-tight camo suit was hot; its capillaries were not quite up to handling his thermal output.

Nearly five meters below, extending from the base of the rock where he lay, spread some two thousand square meters of ground. It was studded with small boulders, nearly covered by patches of grass and shrub and almost surrounded by woods. A rabbit could have hidden almost anywhere in the area, but nothing of human size, even D'Orrey's, could have done so unsuited.

Camouflage aside, he was occupying the best place in the vicinity to see without being seen; vegetation also topped the rock. He was peering carefully through the leaves of a convenient blueberry bush so that even the suit was just now superfluous. However, he never thought of removing or even opening it; it was habit, and the scene below held all his attention.

A dozen meters from the foot of the rock a field mouse was sitting up and looking around, evidently suspicious. It had right to be. Only a few paces from it to D'Orrey's left, apparently hidden from the small mammal but not from above, lay a timber rattler somewhat over a meter long. It was not coiled for action or announcing its presence audibly, but extended at nearly full length, making the size judgement easy. Its enlarged midsection suggested that it had eaten too recently to be in a hunting mood, though that point might be too abstract for the rodent.

The intelligence of snakes is also minimal, but not zero. Its silence now did not surprise D'Orrey; what had caught his attention from above was the familiar rattling a moment before. He had heard it clearly and with pleasure. He had been hoping for it. Presumably the mouse had heard also. *Something* had certainly caught the little

creature's attention.

"See 'em?" D'Orrey muttered at just above a whisper. He knew the approximate locations of his helpers, having posted them himself, but wasted no time trying to see them directly from where he now lay. They, too, were suited.

"The snake, yes. The mouse is pretty small, but filters help." The incoming voice was little louder in his bud phones than his own had been; Vicki, too, was being careful. Snakes are deaf, but most mammals are not.

"How about you, Pete?"

"Sure. No trouble."

"Does either of you see any other animal?"

"Not from here," came the woman's voice.

"No. What is there? What are we supposed to see?" The boy was young enough to be bothered by any suggestion that he might be missing something, and spoke loudly enough to betray the feeling.

"Watch. It's much better hidden. It's what I was hoping for. If the other day means anything, you'll both see it soon."

"The snake's moving," cut in Vicki. Jaques D'Orrey nodded, quite pointlessly.

The rattler had indeed started to weave toward the man's right and slightly away from him. The motion made no difference in his ability to see it from above, but did take it into the mouse's line of sight. The rodent spotted either the snake itself or the movement at once. It crouched down, drawing together as though to leap away; then, since the menace was not approaching, it froze again and kept watching while the rattler sine-waved onward three or four times its own length, still without drawing any nearer.

"What goes?" Peter asked, more quietly than before. "It must know it's there!" Neither adult bothered to criticize the dangling pronouns; the meaning was clear enough, the boy would have defended himself, and this was no time for arguments.

"Right. You'll see. Wait," D'Orrey muttered just loudly enough for his suit's throat mike to pick up.

"When?" The response was louder again and slightly indignant.

"Ask the snake. Watch." The biologist's impatience was as plain as the hacker's, though the former was ten years older.

The rattler might have almost have meant to answer directly. Its line of travel changed. It turned a little to its own right, keeping its distance from the potential prey nearly constant and also holding the animal's full attention. D'Orrey, with the whole stage visible below him, could see what was coming and was satisfied. He might not believe the impending events himself; he'd certainly doubted them earlier, but at least this time there would be other observers with other instruments. Later he could even hope for records, if equipment were still uncompromised.

"Three or four more meters," he whispered.

"To what?" It was still Peter, of course.

Oh, Natural

"You'll see. It's happening again. Watch 'em both." He was not baiting the eighteen-year-old deliberately; he had hired the fellow more for his demonstrated skills than at his mother's—D'Orrey's sister's—insistence. He simply wanted the others to be at peak alertness, with no more preconceived notions than had been needed to persuade them to come at all.

The snake poured itself onward, following an arc with the mouse at the center until it was heading almost back toward the rock. The still nearly motionless mammal was almost below the man, the rattler now four or five meters to his right. Even D'Orrey, able to see what the others had not yet spotted, grew a trifle tense, though he was far more concerned for his demonstration than for the welfare of the doomed animal. He was not a vegetarian himself, and would have admitted without hesitation that morally he ranked with the snakes.

Events climaxed abruptly. The moving reptile turned toward the victim and increased its speed, now rattling loudly. The rodent responded predictably, turning away from the approaching death and leaping toward D'Orrey's left. The second jump brought it down within centimeters of the second snake, which had been lying motionless, unnoticeable to the prey or the two more distant human beings, coiled and ready. It did not rattle; it merely struck. The mouse saw it in mid-jump, tried too late to change direction, squealed as it felt the fangs, and landed on its side a meter from the already recoiled serpent. It made one more awkward attempt to leap, wriggled briefly, and lay still.

"I don't believe this!" came Vicki's murmur.

"Neither did I. Watch!" replied the man. Nothing was heard from Peter.

Both rattlers were now beside the body.

"They can't *divide* it. They have to swallow things whole. Snake teeth don't cut, and they'd never get enough traction to tear it apart even if they were strong enough. They'll fight, surely!" whispered the woman.

"Does that fit with what just happened—*team hunting*?"

"No. Of course not. Did they find someone's dropped knife, maybe? And how would they—"

"You're getting wild," D'Orrey cut in patiently.

"I certainly am. Watching *snakes* cooperate would drive anyone over the edge. It's not natural—"

"That's what we want to make sure of."

"Are you sure you didn't sneak a false-witness into these glasses?"

"That's closer to sanity but no, I didn't. How could I? You take care of your equipment, don't you? I haven't had a chance to get at 'em—though that could be just because I haven't been looking for one. Don't take my word for it—get 'em checked when we get back, or have Pete do it now. I'm looking for help in a research job, not just confirmation for a Ripley. I had *my* glasses done after I saw this first, and told the hacker w—pardon, told my respected colleague—I'd seen something I couldn't believe. I didn't tell him just what, of course. He said that the smallest false-witness he could design himself which could handle such a job—do the wave patterns, carry the record, allow for changing view line in both planes, be programmed to run only against an appropriate background or in a preplanned inertially located spot, and coordinate in both barrels of a pair of binoculars at once would be at least peanut size, and that there was nothing anywhere near that big except the regular machinery in the glasses. All *that* was working as it should; nothing had been sneaked out to make room for a false-witness."

"Who was the hacker?" asked the boy, speaking for the first time in several minutes.

"A colleague, Jerry Chu. Associate Professor at Orono. Why? You know him, I suppose?"

"Sure, who doesn't?" It was not obvious whether Peter regarded the name as that of a co-hobbyist or a rival.

"Trust him? Is he good as I've always thought? Do you like him?"

"Oh, he's good." There was a pause. "Maybe too good." Another pause, then D'Orrey was surprised by a rush of candor. "He made a fool out of me a while ago."

"So you don't trust him."

"Well—I guess I *trust* him. Maybe I was asking for it. But I don't *like* him. He's just a spare-time hacker, anyway; he's in the bio department, of all things, at Orono."

"And what's wrong with biologists? Your uncle is one, after all. Are we too cooperative with the rest of science, or just not—"

"Is it all right if I get closer? I can't see how the snakes are settling who gets the dinner."

"Something wrong with your glasses?" D'Orrey had not really expected an answer.

"I'd like to use my own plain, unsupported eyes. I know no one's sneaked anything under my eyelids, and if there's going to be a snake fight I want to believe what I see."

"There isn't, but come on over. Just remember these two may not be the only rattlers in the neighborhood."

"I'm not worried."

"That's why we are. Keep your untampered-with eyes open, and get on over there if you must." Vicki allowed some annoyance to creep into her tone, and raised her sending volume enough to make it obvious.

D'Orrey was right; there was no fight. The action was still unbelievable, but happened just as he had seen it before. The rattlers were now together beside the victim, but the larger, the one which had done the herding, watched with apparent indifference as the actual killer proceeded to work its jaws around the corpse and engulf it in ordinary snake fashion. When it had finished, the two wriggled off together to D'Orrey's left, the smaller leading, and finally disappeared even from his binoculars among the bushes. He waited five minutes longer before speaking.

"That's it for now, I expect," he said in ordinary tones. "I'm closest to the trail. I know it doesn't seem natural, Vick; that's why I want to make sure whether it's technical. Shall we meet right here?" He stood up as he spoke and switched his suit off.

"All right. At least, all right if I can get out of this tree without tearing anything. I paid for this suit myself," came the woman's voice.

"Are you sure it's all over? Shouldn't we follow them?" asked Peter.

"I don't say it's over at all. I hope it isn't. I want to set up close observation on those critters. I want to know whether this was natural and new, or some hacker is amusing himself, or what. We're not ready to do it now, though; we have no food and not much water up here. There's a lot of planning to do before we can start a real study. Knowing that it really happens, and right around here, was all I hoped for now. We can talk it over on the way back; I'd rather not do it through the suit coms. I'm coming down." He turned his camouflage back on, since animal behaviorists prefer to be seen by potential subjects as little as possible, and began to make his way carefully



down the sloping side of the rock, retracing his original path up. He had more confidence in his suit's durability than Vicki seemed to, but took no major chances with sharp stones or thorns.

He was several minutes reaching ground level and getting around to the front of the boulder. Both his companions were approaching, though he had to look carefully in the direction he knew she must be to detect the woman at all; her suit, too, was on. The boy's was not, and he was walking around and among the bushes as though he felt no concern for his cam unit or anything else.

"There could be more rattlers around," D'Orrey pointed out again as calmly as he could. Peter took this as implied criticism, quite correctly, but his response was more impertinent than abashed.

"I know. And I know there's snake-bite equipment in the first aid kit, but I'd just as soon they knew I was coming. They can see I'm too big to swallow. Even y—" he broke off; both adults felt they knew why, and were rather pleased. In the week they had been together, and in spite of who was paying the bills, Peter Ben Becker had shown a tendency to make rather perky remarks to and about his uncle, commonly about their seventeen centimeter height difference, which the boy regarded as being in his own favor. D'Orrey had felt that objecting was beneath adult dignity, and was reluctant to have trouble with his older sister. He was pretty sure, however, that Vicki had said something once or twice when he himself was out of hearing.

If the kid were really trying to curb his wit, all to the good. If he were beginning to realize that there were more valuable personal qualities than height, even better.

The man just barely stopped himself from switching off his own suit again. The point about letting rattlers know they were coming had been very well taken, but it seemed poor policy to be guided too obviously by the youngster's advice. In a few seconds he forgot the matter. Vicki's garment also remained active.

No more was said until they met at the kill site. Woman and boy examined the area for details they hadn't been able to see from their trees, but neither found anything which helped answer the obvious questions. The man had seen all he needed. All that really caught his attention was the difference in convenience of watching what the others were doing.

Vicki Kalani's suit was much like his own, though of different make. Its eyes, like his, were the size of split walnuts studded with hundreds of minute lenses, but she had only two, one on the outer side of each shoulder. D'Orrey's numbered three, one on top of his head, one between his shoulder blades, and one at his breast bone. Both pattern processors were where the belt buckles would have been had either garment been belted—prolate hemispheres of coppery polymer about eight centimeters by four, though the man's was mounted with the long axis vertical. Dr. Kalani's also fit better, less because her eight centimeter superiority in height made her easier to fit than because her suit's more sophisticated processor handled warp and woof tension as well as light paths.

All fibers, both fabric components and control and sensor connectors, were far too small to see with the unaided eye. With the suits off turned, as Peter's was, the basic material was almost transparent. The eye-hurting pattern of the tight shorts which were his only inner garment, a random alteration of patches displaying leopard spots, tiger stripes, and geometric exercises in fluorescent colors, could be seen too clearly for comfort.

Vicki's face was also visible as she released her mask; she had knelt to examine the ground more closely, and brought out her pill vial. Her features were rather broad and round for D'Orrey's personal tastes but much easier to look at than his nephew's shorts.

"Nothing the tracks tell me," she announced after several minutes of careful examination. "Any project details?"

"Some. We'll thrash it over on the way down," D'Orrey replied. "Or do you want to stay longer, Pete? Can you think of anything else we ought to do now?"

"I guess not. I'd like to see where they went, but you're right about not staying much longer without supplies. I know better what equipment we should bring up, now. We ought to have brought more food with us this time."

"If I'd been sure we'd see anything, we would have. Now we can feel pretty sure of finding them in this area, we can set up for a longer stay—maybe even move the camp."

"Are you sure these snakes are the same ones you saw before?" Vicki asked suddenly. She had stowed the pills again without opening the container.

"Not at all. They could be, but I can't recognize individual rattlers by sight. But if they are, they seem to work this area fairly regularly, and if they aren't, there could be a whole tribe of them around. Either way this should be a good place to work; there's a lot of clover and berries, and presumably a lot of mice and rabbits."

Peter nodded, and the three started down the trail which opened into the clearing a few meters from the lookout rock. They quickly found themselves in more comfortable shade, but discussing plans was harder than D'Orrey had assumed. The way was usually too narrow to let them travel side by side, steep enough to demand full attention to footing much of the time, and the woman's sneezing was now up to full antihistamine-free level. She used her pills only when this would interfere with work. Nothing was really settled in the half hour they took to get almost back to sea level.

Here the mixed pine and second-growth hardwood opened out once more, and they could see the lake.

Here it was also a good deal hotter, and the midafternoon sun was nearly straight ahead of them. The sea breeze from behind and to their left was blocked almost entirely by hills. As they approached the road—little more than a track, but usable by vehicles—which led out toward the tip of the peninsula, Peter scored another point.

Oh, Natural

"Suits off," he said quietly, deactivating his own. This time neither adult compromised with common sense; even though nothing wheeled could be seen or heard, crossing a road in an operating camouflage suit was what the boy would have called pure crack. D'Orrey switched his unit off without comment; Vicki thanked Peter. None reactivated the garments when they reached the other side.

The camp was still half a kilometer away, beside a brook which emptied further on into the lake. The way was quite open now, and they could talk more freely. Little had really been settled, however, when Peter stopped and gestured for the others to do the same. His other hand went to his waist. His suit, unlike the others, had a belt which carried several items besides the camouflage logic unit; as a matter of courtesy, neither of the adults had asked what these were. Hackers liked to keep their tricks to themselves when not in showoff mood.

He seemed to be listening, but had not asked for silence so was presumably not using an ordinary eavesdropper. He had not removed anything from the belt, but was touching first one point and then another on it, waiting two or three seconds before each new shift of the finger. It was fully a minute before he relaxed and turned to his companions.

"No one's been in the camp, and nothing—no animal—into the tents or the food."

"As far as you can tell," appended his uncle.

"Of course. If I'm wrong, someone's curious enough about what we're doing to cover very carefully."

"Well, if the snakes are a hacker's trick, maybe someone is. If it's legitimate research or, perish the thought, a natural change in snake behavior, no one should be." D'Orrey thought a moment, then risked a guess. "I take it you left sound and maybe other sensors and recorders in and around the camp, and have been playing them back."

"That's the idea."

"The same general sort of stuff you said you'd use for me to track animals up on the Stage?"

"Right."

"Good. How long will it take you to set them up back there?"

"Not long." Peter grinned smugly. "You were here when I set these after we arrived, but never saw me."

"Great. I didn't think of it when we first talked this over, but can you keep our glasses and other gear checked for false-witness tampering?"

Peter frowned thoughtfully for a moment. "I could, but it'd be better for you to stay with Jerry, wouldn't it?"

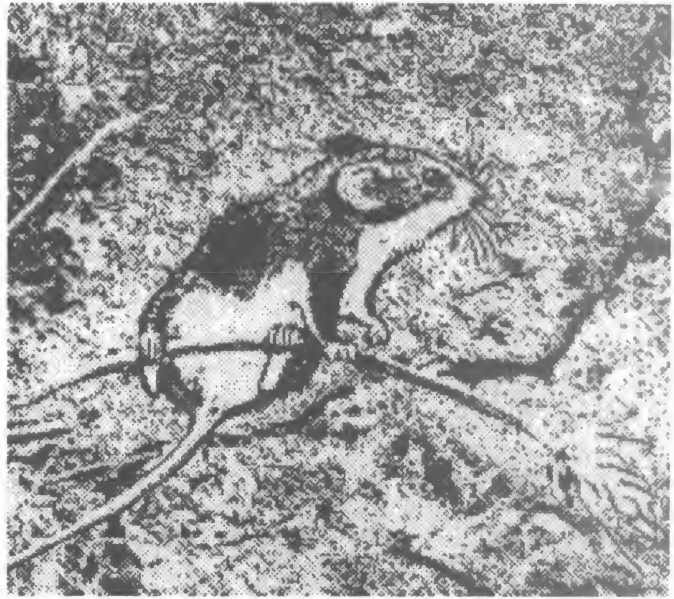
"Why?"

"Because I'm part of this team. Shouldn't the checker be independent? You should keep your personal observing gear—glasses, cameras, recorders—out of my reach, and you should quarantine mine for checking if I ever report anything you don't see or hear."

"Unless you record it, I suppose that's true. But you *can* record, obviously."

"Sure, if you want to trust my records—"

Vicki cut in. "Of course we do. Any record can be faked; everyone knew that even before UFO days, but there's no point assuming it has been until there's trouble repeating an observation. Otherwise no one gets anywhere. You said it just now: you're part of the team, as reliable a part as we are. Science is certainly a *search* for



truth, mixed with a reasonable effort not to decide too easily that you've already found it, but you're worrying far too much about the faker-defense aspect."

The boy glanced at D'Orrey, who nodded. "Even if I had any reason to suspect you, which I don't, she's right. I know about the never-ending war among hackers, anti-hackers, and other hackers, but nothing ever gets done if we spend all the time worrying about rivals and liars. This's where prevention is *not* better than cure; it gets in the way of the work. We assume no one wants to live with the only cure there is for liars until he's forced to. So stop worrying, be ready to record anything any of us decides is worth keeping, and pardon the lecture. You cook this evening; deal out some of that chili you did before if there still is any. It's good."

"Thanks. I like flattery, but you still cook tomorrow." His uncle made no answer, but shed his camouflage suit and stretched happily.

The meal was quickly prepared in an extremely old-fashioned kettle over a jellied-alcohol fire—burning wood was still taboo in the park—and almost as quickly eaten. D'Orrey took three helpings without looking at the boy, whose only comment was a repetition. "You still cook tomorrow."

"And I wash up tonight," added Vicki, getting to her feet. "Don't dawdle too long over that last helping, Jaques." The man made no answer; his mouth was full.

Vicki and Peter, the latter rather pointedly, took advantage the next morning of D'Orrey's culinary duties to remain late in their tents, but the sun was not very high when the three left camp together with the built in back-packs of their suits loaded with food, water, and carefully selected equipment. They hoped to stay away until the study was done, so the tents and unused equipment were collapsed, cased, powered down as appropriate and stowed in a single travel pack concealed in a tree. Bears and smaller animals could be a nuisance, but Peter felt that human interference was much more likely. The adults were pretty sure he was carrying equipment which would warn him if the bundle were disturbed. They didn't ask, but both noticed that he had paid little attention while Vicki carefully adjusted the camouflage wrap on the container.

It was still cool when they started back up the hill. The sea breeze had not yet developed, and would have had little effect at the camp.

anyway. It would help later, but they wanted to get up to Stage, as Vicki had named the work area, before the sun became too oppressive. Once across the still deserted road, all activated their suits.

They wanted to get there early, but even Peter was too experienced to wear himself out at the start. He was willing—again rather pointedly—to allow D'Orrey to set the pace once the slope began to steepen. Vicki tactfully brought up the rear.

This proved to be, not exactly a mistake, but unfortunate.

They had climbed nearly a hundred meters, the woman's natural morning sneeze pattern was well established, and they were at a point where the trail was not only narrow and steep but offered very poor footing in loose crumbled granite, dry dusty loam, and even drier pine needles. All were careful; they had passed this way twice before. Even the fact that it was much trickier descending failed to make anyone careless; Vicki was simply unlucky, perhaps because she was behind and encountering freshly loosened surface.

She ejaculated some words which would have been considered more appropriate for a male—one of low culture—not too many years earlier, as her weight came on her left foot and the substrate slipped from under it. Her hands were both free and her reflexes good as she grabbed for branches, but the only one she caught proved unworthy of trust. Her other foot, rising for a forward step, came down abruptly on an equally unreliable surface well short of the spot she had intended; it slipped too. This brought her chest, stomach, knees and face into violent contact with the trail.

The others heard, but had no time to do anything. She stopped herself after a couple of meters of sliding, at a spot where the slope flattened a little, and struggled back to her feet. She had said nothing after the first moment and still remained silent, checking damage.

The suits were designed for outdoor use, and hers had been actually pierced in only a few places. Her skin had not done so well. She had a deep slash over her right eye, and her knees and palms were dirt-plastered crimson messes. Damage to her suit was at least as eye-catching. Several control fibers had been severed, mostly in places not matching visible bodily injury, and fairly large areas of its body and legs no longer responded to the logic unit. About half her headpiece above the level of the cut revealed the mahogany red-brown of the hair inside, and a roughly triangular area from right shoulder downward to her waist and inward to the small of her back showed the fabric of the sweat suit she was wearing under the camouflage unit.

"Can you walk?" asked D'Orrey. "There's a place a few meters up where we can get close enough together for first aid."

"Nothing seems broken," she replied. "No, don't try to get beside me and help. There isn't room. One of you might get below, so I won't have to worry about slipping again, if you like."

Peter silently came down the trail, passing very carefully the spot where she had slipped, and made his way with equal care around her. The climb was resumed more slowly.

Jaques had been right about the level spot. There was even a boulder large enough for a seat, and after making sure that it was solidly embedded Vicki settled herself on its fairly smooth top.

"At least I *can* sit," she remarked.

"Don't be flippant. Those knees are a mess."

"And my hands. You'll—both of you—have to use the kit. And am I bleeding into my right eye? *Something* has certainly happened to my head."

"It sure has. We'd better work from the top down. Pete, you use the tester; find if there's a skull fracture under that cut. I'll take care of the blood."

The first aid kit was open now, and the older man pulled out a squeeze tube, snapped off its tip, and began to spread a layer of opaque brown gel over the gash. Peter had silently taken out a golf-ball-sized capsule, opened it in walnut fashion, touched the convex sides briefly to each other and pulled them apart. They were now connected by a filament extending from the apex of one hemisphere to the other. He placed the flat side of one over Vicki's left eye at the point corresponding to the cut over the right, waited for D'Orrey to finish his anointing plus a few seconds for the gel to crust, and placed the other over the wound itself. A monitor screen in the lid of the kit came to life, and all three read it with interest.

"Put some goo on this side, too," the boy said after a moment, lifting the sensor to permit the operation. D'Orrey obeyed, and Peter replaced the instrument. The seniors expressed satisfaction, the man with a nod, Vicki grunting approvingly. Moving her head was uncomfortable.

"They match well enough. I guess I didn't crack the egg. I got quite a wallop, though."

"Do you feel dizzy or sick?" asked Peter.

"Not really. I can use a P-pill, I guess; even if I don't really have concussion or shock, it won't hurt."

"At least you're not like Mom."

"Should I be relieved or worried? How *did* you mean that?"

"She'd have you lying down while she brewed some sort of herb poultice to plaster on you, and some other sort of tea to pour into you. She doesn't believe in antibiotics, and less in nano or pseudolife repair gadgets. Let nature heal, she says."

"Hmph. Mostly I agree with her. But why aren't antibiotics natural? They originally came from molds, didn't they?"

"Don't argue with me. I'm just a hacker, as far from nature as anyone can get, she complains."

"At least she knows it's natural for kids to disagree with their parents," cut in D'Orrey. "Let's not wait for nature with these hands and knees. They must hurt!"

The symmetry test for fractures was harder with the kneecaps, since both areas were damaged about equally, but after much moving around of the sensors and a certain amount of argument all three decided that neither patella had been damaged. The chemicals and nano repair devices suspended in the gel could be expected to deal with infection, pain and, within an hour or so, to finish healing.

Even so, walking wasn't easy for a while. They went on, partly because all wanted to get to work and partly because it was better for the damaged knees to be in normal use during repair. More information was available to the nanohealers. Travel was much slower, of course, and now Peter brought up the rear while Vicki set the pace.

She was happy to rest and pull out her pill vial after they reached the study site, while Peter criss-crossed the Stage to plant his instrument layout. This time he kept his camouflage on and travelled very slowly and watchfully; he was quite willing to let any snakes know he was coming, but if he scared the small mammals away it might delay operations. Even so, the process was much more obvious to his companions than it had been at camp. Two or three creatures did bound or scurry out of his path, but none of the group saw anything resembling a mass exodus, and kept their hopes up. Vicki had taken her first pill; D'Orrey hoped it would not prove

Oh, Natural

incompatible with the first aid equipment already at work, but made no comment. She was old enough to have her own judgement—several years older than he.

The rock he had used the day before seemed the best observing site, and it was agreed that all three should stay there. Using trees would have allowed broader coverage of the Stage, but it seemed better to have all three watchers monitor the same area so that memories as well as objective records could be compared. False-witness units were easy to sneak into monoculars, but many times harder with binoculars because of matching, correlation, and cross-connection problems, and *almost* impossible with multiple sets of instruments being used by different people from almost, but not quite, the same point—especially if the observers occasionally moved a trifle with respect to each other. This was not a matter of worry in the sense that D'Orrey had been preaching, but had long been lab routine like clean glassware.

The older two had binoculars and video rings; Peter didn't reveal much about his own equipment, which he had presumably designed and grown himself, but the others assumed he would not only be recording vision and sound but other factors. Use of radiation equipment which might stimulate, activate, track, or control animals and observing gear through minute receivers and transmitters was standard research procedure, and an obvious possibility even to the non-hackers. Neither D'Orrey nor Vicki would have wanted to implant anything in a rattlesnake, but there were many who would consider it an interesting challenge. The hacker mindset had expanded naturally from data processing to nanotechnology, pseudobiology, and gene engineering, which after all differed little from each other.

His elders did not, therefore, try to watch Peter at all closely as he went around the area presumably planting sensors and transmitters, and the boy showed no urge to brag about, or even demonstrate, what he had. He spent about a quarter of an hour moving around the Stage. Apparently he met no snakes, or at least aroused none, and eventually he rejoined the others at the top of the rock.

He was now carrying openly a palm-sized monitor unit. Its screen showed a very active display, but this was not pictorial; symbols neither of the others could understand flickered endlessly on its surface. Peter made no effort to keep them from looking, but wore a half-amused, half-contemptuous smile when they tried. Vicki thought briefly of asking whether he would tell them anything, but decided not to give him the amusement of refusing. D'Orrey faced the same temptation but decided not to give him the amusement of explaining. The man had no objection in principle to showing off—he enjoyed it himself—but considered that Peter's feeling of superiority because

of his height needed no encouragement. He confined himself to a different question.

"Is there anything we can do but wait and hope we're lucky again?"

"Nothing I can do, if you mean about persuading the snakes to come back. There's lots of rabbits and smaller animals, but if only the two rattlers we saw yesterday are involved, they may not want to hunt yet. How long would it take to digest a mouse as big as they caught yesterday?"

D'Orrey didn't know, but guessed, "Maybe three or four days. I'm hoping there are more snakes in on this. I'm budgeting for a wait, though; I don't expect yesterday's luck again so soon."

His pessimism proved justified, but the cause was not serpentine satiation. The trio spent over two hours on the rock while the sun rose higher and higher and grew less and less supportable, and nothing

animal but a couple of mice came into view. Vicki, oldest of the group by several years and far the most patient by nature, simply waited, thinking silently most of the time but sometimes making a remark. Her suit was healing itself slowly but apparently without errors. Her personal injuries, because of or in spite of artificial intervention, were progressing far more rapidly. She took her pill faithfully each hour to keep from scaring subjects away.

D'Orrey, whose own suit was having its usual thermal trouble, spoke more often, though he wouldn't descend to futile complaint. Peter divided his attention between his monitor and the Stage, sweeping the latter frequently with a pair of binoculars which he didn't offer to share with the others. His uncle thought of asking for a look, but didn't want to hear something like, "Aren't yours just as good?"

He suspected that they weren't, that Peter had incorporated devices of his own in his optics, but couldn't imagine what advantage these might

confer—or rather, he could imagine many things, from infra-red and ultra-violet vision extension to time-lapse interferometers permitting better than ordinary resolution, but couldn't guess which might be most likely. It would depend heavily on the kid's specific skills; human limits forced even hackers to specialize.

Vicki's healing completed itself, and after allowing with some distaste a dozen ladybug-sized mechanisms from the kit to crawl over the sites of her injuries scavenging spent chemicals and healing devices, she returned them to the case and resumed her own monitoring of the Stage.

The real interruption came late in the morning. The sun had been ducking behind clouds off and on as fair-weather cumulus began to build; all, even Peter, had taken this as welcome relief. Now a much darker shadow swept over the rock. The wind, which had been rising slowly as the sea breeze developed and had even been of some



comfort, grew gusty, and large raindrops spattered on the rock and the watchers. For a moment they hoped for just a brief shower; then the drops grew smaller, steadier and more frequent.

Peter, after one nonverbal annoyed utterance, clambered quickly down the irregular slope where they had mounted the rock and began dashing here and there about the clearing. He had turned his suit off; apparently he now wanted any rattlers to take responsibility for avoiding him regardless of scientific protocol. He was back in four or five minutes with a slightly embarrassed expression on his face.

"I never thought of rain with some of this stuff. I've always used it indoors."

"Insulation trouble?" Vicki sounded sympathetic, and even Jaques could remember too many of his own lapses to be critical.

"Not so much that. Just..." the youngster fell silent, and his uncle was annoyed. Something informative *could* have come out then. If it weren't merely electrical insulation, what trouble could rain cause a micromachine? He felt the surge of irritation which goes with finding a gap in one's knowledge, seeing no way to fill it, and being unable because of conscience to pass it off as supernatural and therefore unknowable. He obviously wouldn't be told; Peter was changing the subject quite forcibly. "Vick, your suit still has sections not working. Shouldn't it be healed by now?"

"I suppose so. I haven't been timing, though, and don't know just how much damage was done. Also, this never happened to me before, and I don't remember what the manual said I should expect for healing times."

"Maybe I should check it—the suit, I mean."

"Can you? Have you equipment?"

"I can cobble some together in an hour or so."

"Here?"

"Well, no. I'll need my kit back at camp. I could take your suit back and you could use mine if you wanted to keep observing. It won't really fit you—it isn't self-shaping like yours—but its camouflage unit can handle wrinkles."

"But if you aren't here and anything interesting happens, will there be any record? Is your layout entirely automatic? I thought you'd have to be on hand to operate at least some of it."

Peter looked uncomfortable once more.

"Well—I've had to turn a lot of it off, just now. Is there much chance of snakes hunting while it's raining, anyway?"

"Rabbits and mice stay out in it. I expect the rattlers' lives go on as usual, too," answered D'Orrey. "What it boils down to is that the Becker equipment can't observe in the rain, and if this shower lasts more than an hour or two we may as well go back to camp and read Nanofacts for Beginners."

Peter flushed again. There was no way of taking the remark as anything but criticism, though the man had managed to avoid saying "...equipment we were counting on..."

Vicki, soft-hearted in spite of her own disappointment, cut in. "Pete wouldn't have to read. How long would it take to redesign your stuff to work even in the rain?"

"I don't know. I haven't spent much time outdoors. A lot goes on I didn't think about..."

"And it isn't just a matter of improving insulation, you say," D'Orrey added, he hoped not too pointedly.

"Not by a lot. I'll work on it, though. You want me to take your suit, Vick? Or will you be coming back too?" Neither adult could guess whether the youngster wanted to be alone or not.

They debated the question on its own merits for several seconds. Then Vicki sneezed again and reached doubtfully for her pill vial.

"Not just anti-symptom stuff, I hope?" Peter's self assurance suddenly blossomed again.

"I thought you had a low opinion of natural cures," D'Orrey cut in before the woman could answer.

"I do, but that's not the point. Interfering with natural responses to an infection just because they're a nuisance isn't very smart. You should at least decide first whether the responses are helping fight the infection."

"What would *you* do?" asked the woman, rather sarcastically.

"I'd spend a week blowing my nose, until someone—"

"So you do have some trust in nature. That's just what I do, except where sneezing will interfere with the job."

Peter scarcely noticed her interruption. "—cooks up an antibody for just the right virus. I'll have to try that—I haven't done any really fancy chemistry yet, though I grow most of my own gear. I wonder if pseudolife would do the job, or if I'd have to get into high class biochem?" He seemed about to drift completely into abstract thought, but D'Orrey brought the discussion firmly back to practical levels.

"We'd all better go back, I guess, and at least rethink what we should have up here with us. Vicki's nerves and membranes can offer their proper responses to irritation"—another sneeze suggested that they were doing this—"and your gear needs rethinking, you admit. Her suit may need treatment, and even if the snakes come hunting again we can't make the measurements and readings we wanted."

"Maybe *you'd* better stay, though," suggested the woman. "If anything does happen, just knowing something about the frequency of hunts and the possible number of snakes involved could be useful."

The man nodded slowly. "All right. I'll stay 'til sundown, or enough before that to let me get back before dark. You two go on down and do what needs to be done with sniffles, suits, and sensors. Watch your footing—no insult intended."

"Don't worry!" Vicki responded with feeling. Peter had already disappeared down the climbway. She followed, showing no sign of stiffness or other effect of her injuries. D'Orrey's attention shifted back to the Stage as Peter appeared and worked over the area once more. Apparently he had merely turned his equipment off before; now he was collecting it. Vicki was not with him, and Jaques didn't even wonder whether she were waiting at the head of the trail or had started down at once. The boy presently vanished as well—really vanished, by departure, not by activating his suit. D'Orrey stretched himself out behind the screen of bushes, assumed as relaxed a position as possible, and watched the deserted Stage through the still falling rain.

Rabbits, mice, and squirrels might indeed be willing to feed during a shower, but none of them seemed around at the moment. The sun, glimpsed occasionally through brief breaks in the rain clouds, slowly reached the meridian. It sank seemingly even more slowly. The temperature had fallen considerably, which was a relief; the camouflage suit was better at keeping its wearer warm than cool. And at least he had food and more water this time.

No rabbits. No squirrels. No mice. Not even a toad.

No snakes. A few decades ago this would have been no surprise on Mt. Desert, but what some people called Greenhouse Effect and others had named the Warm Ripple, depending on political preference and statistical background, had gradually extended the northern range of the timber rattler by over three hundred kilometers and was still at it. How the creatures had made their way over the causeway from the

Oh, Natural

mainland to Acadia was a matter of speculation, but no one was very surprised. There were far fewer human travellers these days, mostly because of fuel shortage and cost, and even a bear would not have been very startling.

But none of this explained rattlesnakes cooperating in a hunt. Miracles, to D'Orrey, meant high technology or unusual combinations of natural law, not the supernatural. High tech meant people, not spirits. The hacker attitude had spread quite naturally from data handling to nano and bio technology. Shaping micro-machines and pseudolife "organisms" using commercially available enzymes and crystal-patterned molecular assembly guides, commonly and—when spoken aloud—confusingly called "ribosomes" from the trade name of an early model, was no more unusual now than the designing of viruses and more benign software around commercially available solid-state data processing chips had been a few decades before. Even casual—much too casual from D'Orrey's viewpoint—gene engineering, though sometimes illegal, was a common field of amateur activity. Knowledge is nearly indestructible, since it does not obey conservation laws. The cooperative snakes might represent someone's personal game, a serious piece of research to be published in due course, mere mischief or, just conceivably, a new natural phenomenon. D'Orrey, as an animal behavior student, needed to know which. New combinations of natural law were eternal; so were the human urges for understanding, power, independence, and amusement—eternal as knowledge itself. They were also as hard to control, as evolution, religious reformations, drug abuse, nuclear proliferation, and the sport of hacking all showed clearly.

The sun was low when D'Orrey started down the trail. He watched the footing carefully, and had no trouble recognizing where Vicki had slipped on the way up; but there was no sign of any similar accident going down until he was almost at the bottom of the steep section. Then he nearly provided the evidence himself as a loose stone went out from underfoot. His reflexes stood up to the test. His other foot moved quickly and stopped the fall; for a moment he felt the prickle of released adrenaline, then a mixture of two kinds of relief—that he had not actually fallen, and that neither of the others had seen the near-incident. He could have treated any minor injuries himself, since neither of them would know when he had started down and no delay would have been obvious; but suits healed themselves much more slowly, and the boy would certainly have noticed anything wrong even with the garment turned off.

Vicki was visible and audible as he neared the camp; the boy was neither. She was still sneezing, and occasionally coughing and blowing her nose. She was not wearing her camouflage unit, but a warm water-repellent coverall. Her suit was draped inside out over a nearby bush, and D'Orrey decided that his nephew was really showing off. Natural, of course, but this time promising a really useful put-down.

He turned off his suit as he approached the camp—he had forgotten to do so while crossing the road—and gave a cheerful whistle. Vicki saw him at once, waved, and noting the raised eyebrows as he drew nearer, nodded toward Peter's tent.

"He's been busy ever since we got here, as far as I can tell. I don't know what progress he's made. I haven't heard any bad language."

"Vick, you know me better than that!" an indignant retort came from the tent, whose soundproofing was evidently off. "I've figured out what to do, and started most of it. The things just have to grow now."

"Then we can go back in the morning, rain or no rain?" Jaques asked.

"I think so. You never can tell just how long debugging will take, of course."

"Of course," the others agreed together. "Coming out soon?" the woman added.

"Might as well. It's on its own now. Just a minute." The tent entrance rolled itself up, and Peter crawled out and stood up. He was wearing the same shorts as before, designed to support pockets as well as dazzle eyes, plus the shoes whose soles had grown much thicker after a few minutes' use around the stony camp site. A nanohack could make himself very comfortable if inclined that way. His nephew was still, D'Orrey felt, conscious of his own physique, but this suspicion might merely represent an undersized uncle's jealousy rather than objective analysis. It *would* be nice to be a few centimeters taller...

He could have been, of course, but he had much better things to do with his money. Let the kid gloat if he wanted.

"Anything happen?" Peter asked.

"Nope." D'Orrey shook his head negatively. "Nothing bigger than grasshoppers."

"How much time do we budget for just waiting?" the boy asked. Both pairs of male eyes turned to Vicki, the patient one.

"A week at least," she replied promptly and firmly. "If that bothers anyone, maybe you could design some snake detectors for us so we could go where they are instead of waiting for them to come to us. I know it's no use tramping around just looking for them; their prey would hear us and take off first, and they'd either go after dinner or at least away from us."

"But don't rattlers usually just wait for the dinner to get near enough?" objected Peter.

"Yes; but is it what they *usually* do that brought us here?"

"No. You're still cooking tonight, Uncle Jaques."

The rain continued, sometimes very heavily, for much of the night, but the sky visible through the branches seemed cloudless again by sunrise. Peter and D'Orrey of course took advantage of Vicki's cooking turn to stay in their tents a little later, but before the sun was very high the three were again climbing to the Stage. They were laden pretty much as on the previous day, but Peter seemed to have learned something; attached to his belt was an object about the size, shape, and from the way he had handled it, the weight, of an ordinary brick. The others suspected he was bringing his entire stock of nano equipment this time.

Vicki's suit now seemed completely healed. D'Orrey had not asked whether his nephew had done anything to it, assuming that the way it was hanging the night before implied the answer. The question seemed unimportant just now; the catechol embarrassment would come later. They reached the rock, this time without incident, unloaded food and water as before and draped reflecting film over them. Then Peter once more set out his apparatus, leaving his "brick" on the rock.

D'Orrey eyed it thoughtfully, but decided not even to test its weight. He was pretty sure that touching it without the owner's knowledge would not be possible, and however harmless the act and natural the curiosity he didn't want be defending himself.

The kid was close enough to running the group already. His embarrassed ignorance of outdoor environments, even with its resultant delay of the project, had been quite lucky, D'Orrey felt; but it couldn't be expected to keep him down long.

Absolute Magnitude



His reflections were interrupted by a yell from the Stage, coming through the suit communicators but also audible directly. For a moment neither of them could see the boy; then he sprang into brief visibility as his suit cut off, vanished again for a second or two, and reappeared once more. Neither watcher could guess whether the garment was being flicked on and off in indecision or was malfunctioning. Still less could they guess at a cause for either possibility until Peter provided it, coherent now but still highly excited.

"Rattlers! Dozens of 'em! They're heading toward you. What'll I do?"

"If they're heading this way, why do anything? Or are you in their way?"

"No, I'm behind them and they don't seem to care about me. But I can't get back to you or the rock. They're in the way!"

"Go around them. You should be able to run fast enough. Or don't you want to get in front? Just make up your mind how badly you want to be up here with us instead of on the ground with them." D'Orrey tried not to sound impatient or superior.

There were several seconds of silence. Peter remained visible, and appeared to be surveying the ground with some care. When he finally spoke again he seemed calmer. "I guess I can see more down here. Do you see 'em yet?"

Both adults looked carefully before Vicki answered "No" as calmly as she could. "How far are they from you? And just how many are there really?"

"'bout seven or eight meters for the farthest I can see. A dozen or so. I think there were more, and they'd be closer to you now. They're really travelling."

"And how many really are there?"

"Well—I can count eight, now. There were more, though. All heading for the rock. Don't you have a flock of mice, or squirrels, or rabbits, or something they might be chasing?"

"Not that I can see," replied the woman. "And would they be chasing? In a pack?"

"Who knows, now?"

"Are there any more behind you, or on either side?" D'Orrey cut in. "Could you tell whether they were all coming from the same place?"

There was a pause before Peter answered, still more calmly this time. He seemed to be getting back his control, and actually to have looked before answering.

"I don't see any more. These were all between me and the rock when I first saw them."

"Can you check in both directions—sideways, that is—and get some idea whether this is just a small bunch or whether more are coming from somewhere?"

"All right." The suit vanished once more, to D'Orrey's satisfaction; Peter must really be thinking again as an observer. He even began reporting his position every few seconds, realizing that the others would have trouble spotting him.

"Ten meters to your left of where I was. No more snakes... Twenty meters. Still none. Thirty... I'm getting near the trees. Still none. I'm heading back the other way...back where I first saw them...now to your right...Ten meters...none...twenty—Hey! Another bunch from the trees—I'm going back." There was silence for several seconds. "There are fourteen or fifteen in this bunch, mixed up together so they're hard to count. They're heading your way, too. They can't be chasing mice."

"Or you?" queried Vicki.

"No, neither group cared about me. It's something near you, or at least the rock."

"How closely do you feel like following them?" asked D'Orrey.

"I'm keeping them in sight. I'm about five meters behind a couple of stragglers in the new bunch. D'you want my suit off so you can track us?"

"No need. We both have strobes if we need 'em, and as long as you're moving can see you fairly well anyway. If you keep your suit on, you won't have to worry about any more behind you."

"Why not? I'd be less worried if they could see me!"

"Are you sure? We don't know yet what has them excited. If you feel like being experimental bait, of course, we could start finding out."

The boy did not answer for a moment. Then, "Why not? There's plenty of trees. I'll catch up with this batch."

Vicki stirred and almost uttered a protest, then looked at Jaques and merely frowned. Both waited silently and attentively, watching with narrowed eyes the barely visible figure sixty meters away. Not even the first group of snakes he had reported could be seen yet from the rock.

Peter's indistinct outline was approaching them, but not quite directly; apparently he was trying to come up on the right of the group—or should it be called a gaggle, or a wisp, or a pride, D'Orrey wondered briefly and irrelevantly. Surely the language had a collective term for snakes; it wouldn't be surprising if it had several for different kinds, though of course serpents had never been game animals in medieval Europe. As far as he knew.

"I'm only a meter to one side of the group, about halfway between front and rear. They're not paying any attention to me so far. I'm going to cut my suit—don't worry, Vick, I'm good and ready to run."

The tall figure sprang into visibility, heading toward the watchers at nearly a run; if he were still matching speed with the rattlers, both adults thought, the snakes were certainly enthusiastic about *something*.

"They still don't care about me. I'm going to get right among them—"

"Don't be crazy!" called Vicki.

"Don't worry. I'm set to jump, far and fast. What was that poem? Snakes to the right of me, snakes to the left me, snakes before me—they still don't care. I'm going to stop for a minute and check readings."

They watched as he took the monitor from his belt and held it near his face. They then saw that his claim to be ready to jump was fully justified.

Oh, Natural

He jumped, farther and faster than D'Orrey had thought possible even for someone with Peter's build.

"Hey! They stopped and—reporting later. I'm leaving." The departure could also be watched easily; he did not reactivate his suit. He made four tremendous leaps, the monitor still in his hand, taking him over a dozen meters from his starting point; then he paused and looked back.

"They're interested in *me* now. They're all coming at me. I hope whoever pulled this trick hasn't taught them to climb trees." He resumed his flight.

"Lots of snakes can," D'Orrey remarked, mostly to hide his own mounting anxiety. "Pick a tree with—"

"If that includes rattlers I don't want to know it. Wait a minute." The boy stopped again, once more looking back at his pursuers. Then a chuckle came over the communicators.

"I thought it was too much of a coincidence. They've lost interest in me again. I turned my monitor off. They're milling around sort of confused—now they're starting back your way."

"And your first group is in sight here," added Vicki. "Snakes, but no mice or any other prey."

"Did they get distracted when I had my monitor on?"

"I didn't notice, I'm afraid."

"All right. Let me get farther from this bunch—no, I'll wait here and let them get farther from me, and I'll turn it on again. I'll tell you when to watch for results. All right?"

The woman, and even the uncle, were less worried now; a straightforward and only mildly risky experiment was under way. They waited in relative calm until the second pack—that was the best word, D'Orrey decided—of rattlers had come close enough to count.

"All right, if you think you're far enough—or close enough!" Vicki called.

"Right. Monitor on—now!" The pair on the rock watched the reptilian assembly below for long seconds, but no change in behavior was evident. The creatures had come to the base of the declivity, and some of them seemed interested in trying to climb the relatively smooth stone. This was not worrisome; even the human beings had not been able to ascend this face, though mice or squirrels no doubt could have. D'Orrey felt a twinge of uneasiness as some of the snakes wriggled off to both sides; if they surrounded the boulder, there was at least one place where they could certainly get up.

"They doing anything?" came Peter's voice.

"Not exactly," replied his uncle. "If they were responding to your monitor before, it must be too far away now."

"Okay. This lot is coming back. Easy to check the distance effect, but I'll cut off again and wait 'til they all reach you."

Neither Jaques nor Vicki had to look up to know what Peter was doing; there was only one obvious way to make the test. It made more sense for them to keep observing the rattlers.

These showed no change in behavior for some time, even after the second lot arrived. When they did, D'Orrey felt little relief. The reptiles directly under him were starting to behave aimlessly, as though uncertain of which way they wanted to go, but those farthest to the sides still seemed to keep their interest in the rock itself, and were gradually surrounding it, moving out of sight to each side. He did look outward, then.

Peter was scarcely a dozen meters away, still easily visible.

"You're distracting the ones closest to you, I think," his uncle reported as calmly as he could. "You'd better stop where you are—no, move to one side. Can you see them well enough, or should we warn you if they start your way?"

"I can see 'em. We've settled something, anyway."



"What?" asked the woman.

"They've been implanted with something. They're homing, though I'll need the kit up there to spot the actual radiation. My monitor broadcasts too, of course, but they seem to have a stronger yen for the kit itself. If it had been one of the suit processors, of course, this would all have happened the day before yesterday."

"Why didn't they come to the camp? You were working there for long enough," D'Orrey pointed out.

"I suppose no rattlers, or at least no implanted ones, were close enough. We'll have to try parts of the kit, one by one, to find out just what's the light that's drawing them. I'll shut this off, and come on up."

"Be careful on your way," Vicki spoke up. "The things seem to be working around the rock on both sides. There was only one place we could climb, but maybe you'd better approach that a bit cautiously."

"Sure thing, Ma." What seemed to be progress was apparently restoring Peter's ego. He vanished once more in camouflage, but the others could still make him out vaguely as he started around the boulder to their right. D'Orrey picked up the nano kit and placed it as far to the left as was practical; maybe this would draw the rattlers away from the climbing spot. Turning off its contents would presumably be better, but that would have to be left to its owner.

"Watch it!" Peter's voice came again. "A couple of them are working their way up. I'm not sure I can—"

"Don't try!" snapped his uncle, leaping toward the climbway. There was no sharp drop-off. Smooth top gave way with increasing steepness to an irregular slope much more overgrown than the flat part. The growth hid the top of the narrow path until he had descended nearly half way. No snakes were visible even when he got there, and after a moment he went a little farther and ensconced himself a short distance to one side of the route where the snakes might be expected to pass. The interesting question was whether the lure of the kit would cause them to continue up the rather vague trail or allow them to explore. Toward him. It would depend, he feared, on their intelligence level. He hoped this was no higher than he believed. If they passed him without noticing...

The first one, an eighty-centimeter youngster, did. He waited until it was a little farther up than his own position, set his jaw, and snatched at its tail. He caught it just ahead of the rattles and whipped it outward and

Absolute Magnitude

upward away from the rock, only then wondering whether it would land anywhere near Peter.

A second rattler was now in sight, but he took time to call a warning.

"Pete, I'm tossing them back down, but can't tell where they'll land. Watch for snakefalls."

"Fine. Half a dozen are at the foot of the climb, and more are coming. How do I get up?"

No one had an answer for the moment. D'Orrey flipped the second snake back to the ground, and half a minute later processed a third. None of the creatures had so far noticed *him*; their I.Q.s seemed acceptably low, or the implanted homing urge very strong, but he wondered what would happen when his first subject got back. Snakes do have memories of a sort.

"Maybe you could let all the ones on this side get up on top, so I could follow—"

"And get here to find them all wrapped around your high-tech brick?" Vicki finished.

"But if we tossed 'em off the rock from there, it'd take them a long time to get around and back up, and I'd have time to find out which unit was attracting them."

"If you really want to handle rattlesnakes when they've gotten where they want to go and probably have attention to spare, say the word and I'll let 'em up," snapped D'Orrey.

"Well—let me think a minute." The pause was brief. "Tell you what. I'll go back around to the front, and you can keep tossing 'em down here, Uncle Jaques."

"Thanks."

"Then when you can see me, Vicki, and I tell you I'm ready, you can throw me the kit. I'll catch it and start running, turning things off as I go. When they stop chasing me, I'll know which was the right unit and I can keep it off, and the rattlers can go about their business, and I can come back up with you and we can work things out from there. How about that?"

"How long will this all take? I don't want to keep grabbing tails of poisonous snakes all morning. I may improve with practice, but the statistics are against me."

"Right." The boy *might* have been concerned. "It'll be quickest if we start right now. All right, Vick? Heft the kit and try to guess how far you can throw it. I'll get as close as you tell me, unless—" he didn't finish the sentence, but neither listener needed the rest. Vicki picked up the kit, judged it to weigh something over two kilograms, and made a number of simulated throws while waiting for Peter to appear. She was careful about this, fortunately; she stood well back from the edge of the rock, and when the smooth surface did slip from her hand on the third try, it did not fall over the edge. She didn't mention the incident aloud. She had decided that a one-hand underarm toss would be most effective by the time Peter appeared below.

He approached the still numerous snakes to within three meters, his suit off, and looked up anxiously.

"Think you can get it out to me here? I'd rather catch it than have it hit a rock, but I don't think I want to get much closer in."

"Should I give a practice try up here once or twice?"

"Not unless Uncle Jaques is through snake-tossing and can get up there to catch it. Maybe—" He left the sentence unfinished, and both hearers guessed that he had been about to suggest that they change places so that D'Orrey could do the throwing, and then remembered the man's lesser size and strength.

"All right," she said. "I'm not guaranteeing to get it all the way out there, so be ready to come in for the catch. All ready?"

"Ready."

Vicki gripped the smooth, stony material as firmly as she could in her right hand, swung the arm backward as far as she could and forward as hard as she could. She meant to hold on a little longer than she actually managed, and the block started out at a slightly downward rather than a slightly upward angle. Peter saw, and leaped inward without regard for the snakes so as to catch it before it reached the ground.

He was not quite successful. It slipped through his hands and thudded to the surface, fortunately not directly on any of the numerous rocks. This luck was mixed, however; it buried itself partly in the softer ground, and Peter needed an extra second or two to get his fingers under it. He got it away a hand's-breath from the head of a very interested rattler, took an extra split second to make sure he had a firm grip, and began running. The snakes, after a second or two of apparent uncertainty, followed. The monitor was off; if there had been any doubt about the center of their attraction, it was gone.

Peter gave himself a good lead before opening the kit. Giving it part of his attention slowed him down, but he had planned his procedure already. Without regard to possible effects on the test devices he had planted around the area, he opened half a dozen switches as quickly as he could. He ran a few more paces, and slowed to look back. The snakes were still coming. He touched another half dozen, put more distance behind him, and looked back again.

There were nearly eighty units to cut off, and he was not surprised to find that the appropriate ones were in the last group. That was Life. It was also sloppy thinking, but he didn't realize this just yet. He watched, ready to resume his flight, as his pursuers finally lost their interest and began to spread out. One or two were coming almost toward him, but that could be mere statistics; they showed no real interest, though he was fully visible. He began to walk slowly back toward the rock, and incidentally toward the nearest snakes.

"That's done it," he reported. "Good old Murphy—it was one of the last bunch. I can do without this last stuff I've cut off for a while at least. I'll get the rest back in operation right away; I've cut off nearly all the equipment I've set out."

"Are you sure it was Murphy?" asked his uncle.

"What else? It had to be something, and why else would—oh my gosh! They're coming back! What?—Why?"

"First things first. Can you beat them back here?" D'Orrey seemed unsurprised.

"I'll try. Some of them must be nearly straight ahead of me, though."

"You're a good jumper." Vicki, too, seemed to be taking the matter calmly.

"Yes, but—yeah, I can get over this couple. I hope the climb is clear. But—but why?"

"You mean why did you assume that only one gadget was attracting them?" asked D'Orrey as tonelessly as he could manage. Peter gave no answer, perhaps because he was concentrating on travel. His uncle was too kind to repeat the question; the point must already be clear.

The youngster came across the Stage at a speed both adults envied, and disappeared to their right. A moment later there was a yelp.

"There are still some back here!"

"Are they blocking the climbway?"

"Well, no. They don't seem interested in anything special. I guess I can dodge them. By why didn't they come back around front with the others?"

"At a guess, when Vick threw down your kit, the radiation had a lot more rock to shine through and not enough of it made the grade to effect their implants. You could check by flipping a switch or two."

Oh, Natural

"Just a minute 'til I'm a little higher—you're right, I guess. Here they come. One of you will have to take on the snake-tossing duty for a few minutes while I find all the sources. It takes a little while after each cut before I'm sure they're *not* interested any more. I wonder how many—"

"You said something about six variables being enough, the other day."

"It would be for the sort of behavior they were showing. But that doesn't mean they'd home on all the control frequencies somebody chose—that wouldn't make sense—or that there wouldn't be anything I'm putting out that wouldn't attract them even if it wasn't part of this character's control set."

"Bad sentence structure but good thinking—or at least, better. I'll watch the path. Do your testing." D'Orrey worked his way down to where the rock steepened, and met his nephew there. No snakes were following; presumably all significant switches were off.

"We could wait until they've all got out of range," he suggested.

"How long would that be, if they're moving at random?" Peter asked, already supercilious again. "And why wait, anyway? The sooner I know what we can use, the sooner I can shift to innocent wave patterns. All we'll have to wait for is the mice coming back. That'll be long enough, I bet; they must be scared off the hill with all these snakes."

"We should have brought that can of chocolate syrup," Vicki suggested. "That would at least bring mice—or maybe a bear."

"Or bugs," pointed out D'Orrey. "Actually, haven't we done most of what I wanted your help for? We know, basically, why the snakes were behaving so weirdly. As science, this is a fizzle. Nature hasn't done anything surprising—just some hacker, and who can be surprised at *them*."

"Don't be insulting, Uncle Jaques. Even hackers have reasons for what we do—sometimes good ones."

"Sure. You want to prove you can do it, never mind side effects. Someone's probably shot the ecology of this island to pieces just for his"—he shot a glance at Vicki—"or her own amusement, like a kid making tracks with a dune buggy. I sometimes wish —"

"Hold it, friend," the woman cut in. "Whoever did this certainly knows just how many snakes were used. He knows or is finding out how much they eat, and how often. He's altered *one* variable, essentially; just their hunting techniques. He's in a position to make a more *quantitative* study of one piece of this local ecology than anyone, to my knowledge, ever has before. Why are you calling him a hacker? He's behaving like a scientist; one who may be amusing himself, as we all do, but one who at least knows what he's doing and why. He's even conducting this field work on an island. And I hope you weren't about to wish nanotech had never been developed."

D'Orrey was silent, and Peter nobly refrained from smirking. After a moment, Vicki went on less emphatically. "I'm just providing the obligatory alternative hypothesis, of course; we're supposed to be doing research—testing an idea, not just finding support for one. I was thinking *hacker* too, but I don't want to get trapped into taking that for granted."

D'Orrey nodded; he, too would have spent a long time seeking alternative explanations rather than risk been called a watchmakerite, even one assuming a human watchmaker.

"Right. Pete, get what details you can about the homing signals. We should have checked at Orono to see if anyone *is* doing a research project up here. When"—he carefully did not say "if"—you have them, we'll call there."

The youngster nodded, and settled down with his kit. "You keep an eye out for anything coming up," he instructed. His uncle nodded, and positioned himself where he could see anything working up the climbway, and for some time the only words were terse reports.

"One rattler, but seems casual."

"Another, not headed this way."

"First one interested—heading up."

"Lost its enthusiasm. I'll scare it."

Over an hour passed before Peter said, "I think that's everything. There seem to be ten patterns which make them home this way. For all I can tell not more than one or two of them may actually may be meant to make them do anything—maybe none of them; this all may be just a side effect of whatever was planned. We'll have to see another hunt, and try to find what's radiated or what I can do to change that pattern before we can even start to be sure. For all I really know, what I've just been doing may have shut off the intended program and spoiled our own project *and* the other guy's. You'd better *hope* it's a hacker, or Orono will be on your neck for not checking with them first." He started to stand up with his kit. "HEY!!!"

There was evidently more than one way up the rock, as far as snakes were concerned. D'Orrey's attention had been on the path they had used, and Peter's on his instruments; Vicki was still on top watching the Stage. None of them had noticed the two-meter specimen approaching from slightly above the level of the experimenters and, as it happened, from behind both. The rattler was still intent on something ahead of it. Peter saw the motion from the corner of his eye as he was rising, and had immediate insight on what the signal must be.

He was also lifting his kit, and as it reached a point about half a meter off the ground—beyond what D'Orrey would have considered striking range—the creature struck.

Its target might have been the kit, but the kit was in Peter's hands, protected only by the gloves of his cam suit.

The serpent dropped away and recoiled itself. The boy lashed out with a kick which sent it flying off the rock before it could strike again.

"Uncle Jack! It got me!"

"Drop your kit. Vicki, first aid! Pete, sit and relax. Never mind your box. If it's still attracting anything we'll solve that later. Let's see you hand!"

The boy obeyed, and both saw instantly what had happened. The fleshy outer edge of his right hand bore the significant double puncture, and without waiting for instructions he tried to place it in his mouth. The location of the wound made this difficult, but not impossible, and he began to suck.

After a few seconds he stopped and spat, and both could see that he was getting an encouraging amount of blood. He was about to repeat the process when Vicki arrived with the first aid kit.

No time was wasted; all knew what to do. She took a matchbox-sized container from the main carton and handed two copper-colored objects the size of split peas to D'Orrey. Peter was resting the arm and hand, palm up, on his right knee. The man carefully placed one of the hemispheres on each of the punctures and touched a tiny button on the matchbox.

Vicki had extracted another device, cylindrical in shape, also copper colored except for a narrow red stripe along the curved surface from face to face, and about three centimeters in length and diameter. She lifted Peter's arm so the elbow was straight and placed the curve of the cylinder inside the joint with the stripe across the large vein which showed there. The boy flinched slightly as she energized the unit and two needles worked their way into the blood vessel; emergency medical equipment did not always have anaesthetic refinements.

"That should handle it," D'Orrey said as he relaxed visibly. "Most of what's at the puncture won't get away from it, and any toxin getting as far downstream as the big vein will be handled by the washer. Not

Absolute Magnitude

natural—at least, not as natural as the snake or the poison ivy Pete had your suit draped over last night—but it works.”

Vicki sneezed, but made no move to take another pill, and no response to either part of the “natural” remark. The man resumed, addressing Peter. “I suppose you have enough material to let me call Orono about this project? You hadn’t quite said so when our subject interrupted.” He wasn’t quite as indifferent, or even quite as confident in the first aid equipment, as he sounded, but wanted to get his nephew’s mind elsewhere.

“The interruption was more info. If you’ll get my kit, I’ll see.”

“If I can get it. Our friend may be back by now.”

“Dropping it should have turned everything off.”

“It didn’t when I dropped it to you before,” Vicki pointed out.

Peter’s mouth opened, and he looked blankly at her for a moment.

“You’re right! It didn’t!” His gaze wandered into the distance, and he started to move his right arm. She stopped him firmly; he obeyed her hand pressure, without bringing his attention back from wherever it had gone.

“Uncle Jaques. Check the kit. If no snakes are near, bring it to me.”

D’Orrey obeyed without comment, maybe the kid *should* be in charge right now.

“I don’t see any,” he reported. “Here it is.”

Peter seized the block with his left hand as Vicki tightened her hold unnecessarily on his right. He set the kit on his left knee, took the monitor from his belt, and watched its screen for some seconds.

“It didn’t turn off this time, either,” he said at last. “Something’s interfered with my controls. How long before I can use both hands?”

The woman looked at the first-aid screen. “Five or six more minutes should have you pumped out.” Peter waited out the time with what his uncle considered surprising patience, learning only later what the real emotion was.

Vicki removed the blood filter pump and the venom denaturant units at last, and he flexed arm and fingers for another half minute.

Then he went to work on his nano kit. He seemed to be examining every separate module and trying every switch, though it was not always obvious to the watchers just what was going on; the control system itself was as hard to see and obscure in detail as the mechanisms it directed. The first aid kit was state of the art as of a couple of years earlier and reasonably familiar to any adult; this, like any hacker’s work, was an individual—*private*—development.

Peter spent several minutes at the task, and his uncle got a distinct impression toward the end that he was working very slowly, almost as though he suspected a truth he didn’t really want to believe.

Finally he detached completely the plate which until then had hinged out from the brick and carried another monitor screen on its inner face, something neither had seen before.

An imperceptible gesture brought the screen to life. Exactly in its center was a blank area about a centimeter across with a set of tiny red symbols inside it. Peter seemed about to throw the whole assembly to the ground, but he controlled himself, put it down gently, stood up, and walked toward the top of the rock. He stood there silently for two or three minutes, while D’Orrey and Vicki looked at each other blankly. Eventually, the man’s imagination clicked back into gear.

He carefully refrained from saying anything like, “Made a fool of you again, did he?” At the same time, he had to know —

“D’you suppose it was Jerry?” he asked.

The answer came before the boy could speak. It sounded in the left ear of each of the trio, in the form of a husky whisper not recognizable as



anyone’s voice—small size puts physical limits on the detail of any wave pattern produced by a speaker.

“It was. Sorry, Mr. Becker. I had to, and it wasn’t all your fault. I apologize to you for bugging your kit, and to all of you for violating your personal privacy with these ear canal speakers. They’ll be removed as soon as I’ve finished talking to you. Doctor D’Orrey, just why didn’t you check with the department? I have better things to do with my time than ward even the well-meaning curious off my experiments. And I thank you, Dr. Kalani, for your analysis even though I suspect you didn’t really believe it. It was essentially correct.”

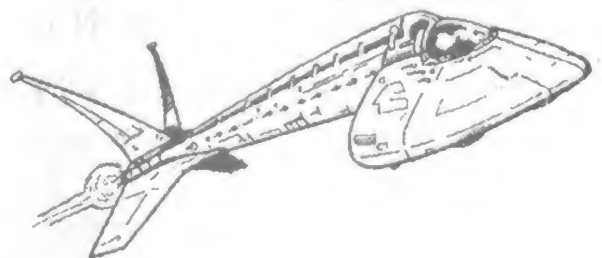
“But you knew what I was doing when I asked you to check my instruments!” exclaimed D’Orrey.

“I did not. You said you’d seen something queer and wanted to check its legitimacy, but you gave me no details. I judged you were hoping to make a discovery, which I can well understand, and wanted no rivals beating you to publication, which I can also understand, so I asked for no more. We’re as bad as the hackers, Jaques; we don’t trust each other enough. Maybe you can profit by this, Mr. Becker, and don’t wind up a complete lone wolf. I fear we two scientists may be too old to change.”

“Three,” corrected Vicki Kalani. “I guess it’s natural. Pete, of course you can do something about the catechols in poison ivy.

“I haven’t started to itch yet, but if...” her statement trailed off and Peter Ben Becker looked uncomfortable again. “Better try the first aid kit,” he muttered.

“Better still,” suggested his uncle, “try learning to recognize poison ivy. You are planning some outdoor research, aren’t you? And Vick—how about taking one of my cooking turns? I cleaned your suit last night while you were both asleep.”



Book Reviews

Reviews by John Deakins

Maskerade by Terry Pratchett

HarperPrism, 233 pages, \$20.00
ISBN0-06-105-251-5

Pratchett, the master of light fantasy, has banged out another Discworld novel. The last time we met the three witches in *Lords and Ladies*, young Magrat (the inept one) had married the king of Lancre. Roly-poly, prurient Nanny Ogg persuades steel-spined Esme Weatherwax that, "When shall we two meet again . . ." doesn't roll off the tongue. They're off to Ankh-Morpork to "rescue" local girl Agnes Nitt from the Opera. Agnes, who would rather be called Perdita Dream, is uninterested in being recruited. With the body of a beached whale and the voice of an angel, she must compete with beautiful air-heads and still survive the madness of Opera.

The book takes some shots at publishing, but its running jokes are all Opera: the starving ballerinas; the idiotic plots; its Money Pit nature; and (of course) a Phantom. For Nanny, a good ending and a good time outweigh the minor details of morality along the way. Esme does Good emphatically, using the Save-Time/See-It-My-Way system. Neither Phantom nor Ankh-Morpork is a match for them. Pratchett writes some wonderfully empathic stuff about The Man (or Woman) Behind the Mask and/or The Mask Behind the Man, but *Maskerade* doesn't bombard the reader with humor as previous books have done. You will enjoy the Phantom and his alter ego, as well as the murderous Phantom. The porcine Italianate baritone Enrico Basilica (formerly Henry Slugg) will make you smile, as will the woes of the Opera-owning cheese merchant. There are several cameos by our old friend DEATH. Greebo, the meanest tomcat alive, who briefly became human in *Witches Abroad*, is once again morphed into trouble. The usual wagon-load of Pratchett's chair-shaking belly laughs is missing, however. *Maskerade* is a good book: a short book; a worth-your-timebook, but not Pratchett's best. It is an RBI, but not a home run. Neither is it Pratchett's last time at bat. We expect more, and funnier, later.

How Few Remain: A Novel of the Second War Between the States by Harry Turtledove
Del Rey/Ballantine, 565 pages, \$25.00
ISBN 0-345-41661-9

Harry Turtledove's *Guns of the South* was well received. Publicity leaves the false impression that *How Few Remain* is its sequel. However, *Guns* won't easily support a sequel. Time travelers introduced modern weapons to the Confederacy, to alter history intentionally. That story branched so sharply off the familiar that, beyond a few years, its "future" would be unrecognizable.

In *How Few Remain*, Turtledove changes only one historical factor—the capture of the Confederate battle orders before Antietam. Without that intelligence, Federal forces could not have intercepted. Lee would have later beaten McClellan decisively, ending the war, dividing the Union, and bringing Confederate recognition from Britain and France.

Twenty years later, every beaten Northerner aches for revenge. Abraham Lincoln, a despised figure, has left abolitionism to become a founding father of American Socialism. Renewed war between the North and South over Confederate purchase of northern Mexico is inevitable.

The opponents have rapid-fire rifles, indirect artillery fire, and Gatling guns. Like World War I Europeans, they must be taught, the hard way, that mass assaults into defensive fire are suicidal. A Republican president plunges the U.S. into disastrous invasion, and a sea war against British fleets. Utah Mormons attempt secession; the British thrust into Montana; Mark Twain witnesses the shelling of San Francisco; Theodore Roosevelt organizes a volunteer regiment; J.E.B. Stewart and Geronimo fight bluecoats, Mexicans, and each other.

Turtledove's weakest offerings are the [obligatory] sex scenes with George Custer or Mark Twain. Still, we're ready for the next chapter. The reader will realize that a new war is shaping, near 1900: the Confederacy and its Franco-British allies against a United States allied to Germany. Be prepared next time for "President Custer" arrayed against the Socialists and hot-headed Teddy Roosevelt. It should be fun.

Time Travel by Paul J. Nahin

Writer's Digest Books, 200 pages, \$16.99
ISBN 0-89879-748-9

From Ben Bova's Science Fiction Writing Series, *Time Travel* is billed as "A writer's guide to the real science of plausible time travel." The text lives up to its claims. If there has been a significant story in the time travel subgenre in the last century, Nahin refers to it or quotes from it.

Literary references are not intimidating, but for some readers, the math may be. If you did not have an "A" in Algebra II, much of this book will be beyond you. There is more Physics than fiction. Nahin offers excellent summaries of the works of Einstein, Godel, Heisenberg, and Lorentz. The (math skilled) reader receives clear explanations from general and specific relativity; time-like and matter-like world-lines; hyperspace and quantum physics; FTL particles and black holes.

This text is so exhaustive that it is almost exhausting. Worse, the plausible Physics solutions of time travel are only usable to hard science fiction with a pre-existent faster-than-light drive. Seeking a device that spans, not light years, but a temporal jump from today to yesterday, the reader will be disappointed. Time travel by rotating the entire universe, spinning a cylinder of infinite length at two-thirds the speed of light, or playing games around the (very dangerous) event horizon of a spinning black hole are not particularly useful on earth. Most real time travel solutions are titanic; FTL physics and time travel are mutually entwined.

Further, though Nahin nods to the Law of Conservation of Angular Momentum, he does not deal with its potential problems. *National Geographic* estimates the combined velocities of your present piece of space at hundreds of kilometers per second. Traditional time-travel stories involve moving temporally, while remaining fixed in space in relation to the earth's surface. In the Copernican universe, the earth moves inconveniently, requiring a complex shift in space to accompany any geocentric time shift. Disappointingly, after the exhaustive detail elsewhere, Nahin overlooks that problem entirely.

Book Reviews

This text, though overpowering, is nevertheless an excellent source for the hard SF writer wanting to begin at the science and math foundation of time travel.

Reviews by Joe Mayhew

A King of Infinite Space by Allen Steele
HarperPrism, 312 pages, \$23.00
ISBN 0-06-105286-8

Shortly after the narrator, Alec Turner, a self-absorbed, infantile drug brat of 25, begins his story he is killed in a car crash in 1995. However, he has returned to life in 2099, cloned from his cryogenized head. His father had lavished everything on him but attention, including what his dad thought would be eternal life.

As Alec's death-dreaming mind slowly opens again in a womb-like white ward, he is a sort of an adult infant again, but this time, more child-like than childish. As his memories return like bad dreams, they are disturbing.

Like the hero of Kipling's *Captains Courageous*, he had been tossed into a life of work and responsibility, however his feelings are mostly controlled by drugs—whereas before, his mind had been uncontrolled by them. Steele is particularly fresh and vivid in the telling of Alec's awakening to his identity.

Like the prodigal son, Alec finds he has lost the freedom and privileges of his father's money. Instead of being resurrected to glory, he learns he is a "deadhead" owned by the mega-powerful "Mr. Chicago," and he isn't grateful (There are heaps of Grateful Dead references in the book). Tired and resentful of his life as a low-level servant, he escapes his prison-womb by rather incredible self-control and planning. His luck is phenomenal. This part of Alec's adventure is almost over the edge, though exciting.

But he finds that while he has escaped from his prison to infinite space, his mind is still "bounded in a nutshell." Unlike Hamlet, Alec takes arms against outrageous fortune, only to learn that fortune was taking rather good care of him, in its own sly, perverse way.

Steele's hero tells his story in such a way that the reader learns a lot more about him than he is aware of himself. Surprisingly, his bodacious adventures provide good wheels for rather a thoughtful book.

Jack Faust by Michael Swanwick
Avon Books, 337 pages, \$23.00
ISBN 0-38-097444-4

This is Swanwick's best book to date. He just keeps getting better, and considering he

started out dam good, it's safe to say you're in good hands.

In Jack Faust, the Wittenburg alchemist, conjures up a Mephistopheles who claims to be an alien rather than a demon, and can give Faust only information, but what a gift that is!

Mephistopheles tells him why he is helping him: "It is quite simply our will that your race should die." When Faust asks, "Must I obey you?" He is told, "Do what you will, only listen." Faust says, "I believe that Mankind can endure any truth and, more, that with the perfection of knowledge we will and must ascend toward the perfection of the spirit. We are not animals! But if I am wrong... If the common run of people cannot rise to the challenge of knowledge, if the only check on their passions is ignorance, then they deserve whatever they bring down upon themselves. I wash my hands of them."

And so Faust begins to invent the wonders of science and amass a fortune from introducing them into the medieval world: beginning with the leaf-spring for carriages, he goes on to cure the plague, publishes the periodic table, and even invents radio. And yet, each marvel seems to have a worm in its heart. They bring pollution and all the ills of industrialization gone amuck. Eventually, everyone who can afford to, hates and resents his wealth and power. He retreats to a rather sinister England where he seems to be more accepted. As the adventure progresses, historical time seems to dilate so that Faust intrudes into things of the centuries leading up to our times, but not via ordinary time travel; instead he collapses time through an accelerated technology which bruises as much as it blesses.

Faust leaves his great love, Gretchen, behind in Germany to manage his projects. As in the legend, she is destroyed from her contact with him. But, in a way, she triumphs.

If you are familiar with Goethe's, Marlowe's or Gounod's Faust, you'll delight in how he respins the legend, but somehow remains true to it. If you aren't, you won't feel lost or confused.

This sensual, dark, vivid, and sardonic book reads more like science fiction than fantasy.

A Geography of Unknown Lands by Michael Swanwick

Tiger Eye Press, 151 pages, \$12.00
ISBN 0-93176307-X
P. O. Box 172, Lamina, PA 17043.

All but one "Mother Grasshopper" of the five stories in this collection had previously

been published, but each one is a keeper. The introduction, "The Wireless Folly," is sort of a story itself, a wry view of the landscape of Science Fiction.

"Mother Grasshopper" takes place on a gigantic grasshopper in space, using surprisingly detailed physics for all its absurdist premise. This is what Swanwick does: he invents the impossible and then makes it work.

Its narrator, who lives in a village on the grasshopper's eye, is lead away by a mesmerizing stranger to spread plague and death.

The other stories are "North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy" (a rescue attempt from the train from New York to Hell), "The Edge of the World" (some kids exploring a deteriorating, litter-strewn staircase down over the edge of the world), "Radio Waves" (the postmortem horror and risk of love and memory to an earth-bound fetch), and "The Changeling's Tale" (a human boy who ran away with the elves learns what it cost him when he comes back home).

Swanwick tells delightful stories set against the oppressive absurdity of life. When you read them, expect that the strange will begin to make an uncanny sense.

A Geography of Unknown Lands is a sound investment if you're looking for carefully written, fresh and quirky ideas. It is Tiger Eyes publisher Chris Logan Edwards' first book, and a very impressive opener. You would do well to take notice of anything he publishes in the future.

Reviews by Pam Meek

The Death of Princes by John Peel
Pocket Books, 276 pages, \$5.99
ISBN 0-671-56808-6

The Death of Princes by John Peel is a wonderfully written *Star Trek* book. Peel in particular creates a pair of wonderfully vibrant alien cultures in the Burans and Iomidans, and it is upon these two cultures that the two plots of the book rest. The Burans, in particular, have been strongly created, and it is amusing to watch Worf struggle, and gradually come to accept the Burans' own strict moral code of honor.

The plot begins as the crew of the *Enterprise* is sent to the new member world of Buran, whose members are dying of a plague they believe was created by the Federation. En route, they receive an emergency transmission from an observing outpost on Iomides. One of their members has gone off on a mission to break the Prime Directive, in hopes of saving

Absolute Magnitude

its ruler from assassination. The better of the two story lines is on Buran, as a wary comradeship develops between Worf and the Buran head of security, while the friendship between Picard and the crown prince J'Kara is a wonderfully rich highpoint to the plot. I was impressed by the skill of Peel as he flawlessly wove both plots together even though on the surface, they were extremely different stories. In the end, both worlds suffer the devastating death of their rulers, for very different reasons.

John Peel has accomplished the difficult task, weaving the subplots together to create a harmonious whole. The story is well paced, when one group is exploring moral issues, the other is experiencing action, until the dramatic tragic climax explodes in the face of the reader. *The Death of Princes* is a wonderfully rich *Star Trek* book, well worth the read!

The Shadow Within by Jeanne Cavelos
Dell Publishing, 259 pgs., \$5.50
ISBN 0-440-22348-2

I have the distinct pleasure to be in a select group, one of the few rabid *Babylon 5* fans who has watched the series from original two hour movie to the opening of the fifth season of the series without missing an episode. It was shortly after a group of my friends, also B-5 fanatics, finished watching the disturbing episode "Z'ha'dum" that I discovered *The Shadow Within*, by Jeanne Cavelos. This is the seventh in a series of *Babylon 5* stories that have been exceptional extensions of the television story line, Jeanne Cavelos undertook the difficult job of piecing together several separate histories of the major characters while keeping them congruent with the events that had taken place already. Without exception, she has done an incredible job.

Cavelos begins her story, appropriately enough, with Anna Sheridan, exploring and developing Anna and John Sheridan's relationship. The history of John Sheridan is simply icing on the cake, it is Anna Sheridan's story that is told, and rightfully so. The story is frighteningly twisted as Mr. Morden joins the *Icarus* party. If you've watched the show, you already know what the man is; the real question becomes, was he the famed monster of B5 from this beginning, or does his transformation come later, after the hands of the Shadows leave their mark on him? The question keeps you reading voraciously as the *Icarus* gradually loses communication with the world outside, and Anna Sheridan discovers a saboteur on board. Cavelos is not

above irony, Anna Sheridan's decision that Morden is the only one she can trust is painful, given what Morden would later do to her husband John.

This is a complicated story, and probably not the best story to begin with if you are new to the *Babylon 5* universe. For those of us who have been watching for some time, *The Shadow Within* is a marvelous complement to the show, and a history well worth reading. Cavelos does a wonderful job explaining the purpose of the Shadows, and clarifying those brief scenes from "Z'ha'dum" that were all we knew of how Anna and John Sheridan's life together ended. She does a wonderful job of creating a ghoulish-tension, waiting for Anna to begin her never ending nightmare deep in the bowels of a Shadow ship. In true *Babylon 5* fashion, the book doesn't end with a scream, as you might expect, but with a whisper. I highly recommend the book: it's incredibly well written and fast paced, as well as a shining example of the *Babylon 5* universe.

Reviews by Ian Randal Strock

Firestar by Michael Flynn

Tor Books, \$6.99 ISBN 0-312-53006-3

Rogue Star by Michael Flynn

Tor Books, 444 pages, \$25.95 ISBN 0-312-86136-2

Firestar and its sequel, *Rogue Star*, tell the first two-thirds of a story. What that final story is, we cannot yet say, but from its beginning, we can tell that it will be good.

Firestar is the story of Mariesa Van Huyten and her obsession to get the human race into space. The head of Van Huyten Industries, a huge business conglomerate with nearly limitless resources, Mariesa has the foresight to see a future where humanity lives among the planets, the economic wherewithal to make that vision a reality, and the fear of an asteroid impact doing to humanity what the Chicxulub impact did to the dinosaurs to drive her relentlessly. However, Mariesa, VHI, and the cadre she gathers around her, have to deal with other problems along the way, such as competing business interests, government control (some would say, interference), international treaties, and stockholders who view the future as "next quarter's dividend payment," instead of Mariesa's longer view as "protecting humanity from the low probability, but high impact, death that might befall us from the sky."

Firestar begins with the atmosphere-skimming meteorite Mariesa sees at age 18 that will drive as much of her following life as we'll see. It takes us through

VHI's attempt to lead the children of today (actually, a few years from now) to a greater awareness of the world around them (and, coincidentally, more interest in space). For some, the "indoctrination" works. For others, it becomes something else to fight against. And it takes us through the machinations Mariesa and her inner cadre must put into motion to build the infrastructure necessary for regular space travel and permanent space-based human habitation.

It's obvious that Mariesa and company will succeed, but how they get there is a tricky, fascinating trip. Why did Iron Mike decide to ride along on the first, unmanned, test flight of the Planck? Who will be the thirteenth man to set foot on the Moon? Can we get up there in time (in time for what)? A good read by itself, *Firestar* is also a great introduction to...

Rogue Star, which picks up a few months after *Firestar*'s end. Humanity is definitely in space to stay, and Far Trip, the first manned expedition to an asteroid, is under way. Construction of a full-blown space station is in progress, and the first blue-collar workers in space are on the job.

This time, we follow the Far Trip explorers (all three of whom we know from *Firestar*) as they rendezvous with, explore, and discover some fascinating, disturbing things about The Rock.

We also go with the welders and the riggers who apply for, and some of whom are accepted to, work on the space station. What their months in orbit do to their home lives; how they adapt to the unique conditions in which they must perform their commonplace jobs; and their heroism in time of need are all fodder for the story.

And we see Mariesa suffering under the scrutiny of her stockholder-relatives, as well as the pressure of a political president who needs to do certain things for political reasons—things that conflict with Mariesa's desires, and yet push her goals toward fruition. Can she knuckle under to his pressure, in exchange for the hardware she needs to fulfill her goals for humanity? Can she push back enough to keep her position as head of VHI?

And then, of course, there are the external business pressures—from competing businesses who now are also in space. Will the space station survive? Will the construction workers? Will there be a rendezvous point for the Far Trip travelers to return to? And, when they do get back, how will humanity react to their news?

Book Reviews

Well, most of these questions are answered in *Rogue Star*. The few that aren't are obviously left for the third book, *Shining Star*, which, unfortunately, is not yet complete. *Rogue Star* suffers from that "second book of a trilogy" disease: the first book, *Firestar*, stands very well on its own, written, as it was, as a single novel. The second installment, however, leaves too many loose threads for this reader's taste. It is a complete novel, and a good one at that, but I think it'll be even better when all three are available.

Illegal Alien by Robert J. Sawyer
Ace Books, 292 pages, \$21.95
ISBN 0-441-00476-8

Illegal Alien is a cute title for a not-so-cute book. Actually, it's an intriguing book dealing with two main questions: How does humanity react when extraterrestrial visitors, with obviously superior technology, arrive in what could be the next few months? what happens when one of those aliens is accused of murder?

A landing craft is followed into the atmosphere from orbit, and met by a US aircraft carrier, a Russian submarine, and a cruise ship in the middle of the Atlantic. After realizing that, of the three, only the carrier is a suitable place for the craft to alight, the first alien, Hask, learns English with Frank Nobilio, the president's science advisor, and Clete Calhoun, a science popularizer following in Carl Sagan's footsteps. The carrier begins steaming toward New York, to deliver Hask to the United Nations, but he must take a quick jaunt back the mother ship in orbit, to revive his six crew mates and bring them all along.

The eighth member of the original crew, we discover, died in a collision in the Kuiper Belt, which is why the aliens can't go home again—the mother ship needs repairs. The Tosok (our alien visitors) can direct the fabrication of the necessary parts, but don't have the wherewithal to make them themselves. Thus begins our experience with our guests from the Alpha Centauri system.

After their tour around the globe, they settle in at a campus in southern California, near the three main contractors who are working on their parts. The Tosok are friendly and interesting guests, and life is good until Clete turns up dead and eviscerated.

The most obvious suspect turns out to be Hask, and after his arrest, the bulk of the novel focuses on his trial, what modifications to our legal code must be accepted because he is not a human being, and how it all appears to these

truly alien outsiders. Since murder is not a federal crime, Hask is tried in a state court, and Frank can do nothing with his federal powers to help his new friends from the stars. He can, however, find Hask a good lawyer, which he does.

With many references to today's current events (the OJ Simpson trials serve as examples for Frank and Hask's lawyer), we watch a wonderful courtroom drama, where the outcome will probably hinge on a completely alien way of thinking, alien physiology and taboos, and standard legal procedure. What I also found interesting is that the author is Canadian—we have an alien talking about the US legal system as viewed from a nonhuman alien's point of view. There's no problem, however. Mr. Sawyer has obviously done a lot of homework, and given us some very good insight into ourselves.

The denouement, however, is not something you'd expect, but works so well that I can't describe it without ruining your read of the book, so I won't. Read it yourself. It's a good read, and a quick one.



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VIRGINTOOTH by Mark Ivanhoe

"Sensual, well-crafted, fascinating, revolting, grotesque and splattered with gore, enlightening, humorous and horrifying." -- *Nightside*

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Shariann Lewitt is a third-generation Manhattanite. She didn't leave the City until she began her graduate studies at Yale. She has nine books in print. *Interface Masque* is a Tor Hardcover.

Interface Masque

by Shariann Lewitt

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Pieta robes were so full and loose that he could carry anything under them. Once upon a time he could have carried enough weapons for an entire squad hidden in the massive sleeve. This time all he had was a soft package taped to his ribs, the way he had learned from his mentors back home so very long ago.

He waited through the first break and the second. Better to see Lina disappear. She had been some help and so she deserved a chance, at least. For himself, he wasn't worried.

He sang. He sang better than he had ever sung in his life, his clear, pure tenor shimmering with emotion. Perfectly disciplined, his voice was like water, underlying the weave of the music. He let himself drown in the music to forget his plans and his hopes, to forget everything but the glory of the song.

He soared. He had been promoted. For a warrior people who honored bards above kings, he had made the ultimate leap into the priesthood. He was that perfect fusion of what a person should be—warrior, artist, seer. He could tell the future because he was going

to create it.

The third break came. Now it was almost lunch time. Today's opening statements had been made, the assembly hall filled with senior members of every Sept. Attendance had been taken and they were all accounted for, or at least someone had whispered that when Sean went for coffee. He had been too intently focused on the music to notice.

He didn't need the reassurance since he recognized all the extravagant masks and costumes massed together. Maybe one or two were missing, lingering in a Sept House or more likely a coffee bar for some private consultation. That was not important. In the end the act itself mattered more than the result. He didn't care who survived and who was absent. Only that they would understand that their goals were—not acceptable.

That's what David had said. Over the years they had taken too much power bit by bit and no one had noticed. Now there was nothing less than the terror squads of Sept Sorian that David called blackshirts.

Sean understood all too well. He had fought an enemy like this at home. He had grown up caught in the ebb and flow of their power and he remembered how, when he was very young, his parents had hoped for a peace that never came. The enemy became more dangerous in the quiet of the negotiated cease-fire that they didn't quite trust. Sean had experienced only too personally how they finally relied on brutality to assuage their fear.

He knew it, nor could he ever forget. The long white scars on his chest and the uglier ones that curled around the insides of his thighs, had faded over the years but they were still clearly visible, as immediate as the memory of the random violence that had caused them. After he had been in Italy for several years he thought about having them removed. In the Pieta he could afford it and too many would-be lovers had turned away. Then he had met David, who had caressed the marks and kissed them and called him beautiful and brave.

There was the center—David. There was nothing at all Sean would not do for David, and in a very short time he would prove it. David had not given him any orders. Sean knew that these people were not used to fighting, not the way his own people were. His only hesitation was that David might not be as thrilled with his gift as Sean would like, and though Sean was perfectly content to die for David's causes he thought it possible that David would be angry if he were killed in the attempt.

David, like the rest of the people here, was still naive. His only experience of repression was words and difficulty, not casual murder in the streets or police searches in the middle of the night. Those would come later, Sean had no doubt of that. Sept Sorian was already starting.

Interface Masque

This must have been what it had been like at the first invasion, he thought. Once his people had believed that their music and their art and their honor and their god were going to save them. They found the presumption of the invaders was so ludicrous as to be laughable.

It wasn't laughable. Sean knew that better than anyone else and he certainly knew it far better than David. So he knew what he had to do to save them all, and to keep David's reputation clear. He had to make everyone understand that David was stronger and larger than these plotters so they could win a decisive victory early. That was crucial in Sean's overall strategy.

During the break he took a coffee and greeted a few of his choirmates and then excused himself to the toilet, which was perfectly reasonable. But since he hadn't been here before he took the wrong door and found himself in the half empty Assembly hall—precisely as planned.

No one noticed him in his blue robe and his white mask. He slid his hand under his working uniform and pulled the soft pack from under his clothes. In the voluminous choir robe with no one paying any attention to him it was easy. One of his earliest lessons had been that no one pays much attention to anyone's actions. Most things can go unnoticed. People edit with their minds, make things normal, make them fit a common pattern. People often do not see anything out of the ordinary even when the event was not common at all.

He concealed the packet in his hand, the tape still dangling from it. He walked to the podium with assurance. Once there he used the tape to secure the few grams of explosives and the timer to the underside of the speakers' table.

The exercise took barely two seconds, but his heart was racing and his breathing was shallow. It had been a long time since he had felt this exhilarated, this afraid, this alive. Like sex and better, the fear of getting caught and the knowledge of what he was about to do made him feel superhuman. There was nothing he couldn't do, nothing beyond him.

A Board member in an extravagant costume came up to him. "Are you looking for something?" the member asked with a slight accent.

"The toilet," Sean answered, putting just a tiny hint of confusion into his tone.

"Go out the main doors and then it's past the corridor. Everything around here looks the same."

Sean thanked the Board member and left. The doors did not look at all the same. He went upstairs to a smaller restroom he had found on earlier forays in the building. This one was empty.

He slipped off the blue Pieta robe. Underneath he wore a loose dark red tunic to his knees and black pants. It concealed enough. He put on the plain Pieta white mask and a black beret to cover his bright hair. Now he looked like a Venetian out for a casual stroll, or maybe a tourist trying to be sophisticated and partake of the liberty of the masks. The important thing was that he looked nothing like a Pieta singer or a Board member or anyone else to be noted or acknowledged.

He waited until he heard the music again, soft strains under the thick insulation of the old floors and walls. They were back in session which meant he didn't have much time left.

He left the building by the back stairs and disappeared into the maze of alleys that Venetians called streets. He was not terribly familiar with this area and so he headed only one way. When the narrow passages turned on themselves he always chose the right turning. He had seven minutes to get away.

He arrived at the vaperetto stop to find it empty. The boat-bus had just left. He had three minutes, and while he thought he was probably far enough and there were enough structures between him and the Board building, he still would prefer to be across the canal.

He hailed a taxi that refused to stop on the vaperetto quay but made him move down so that it was a legal taxi stand. He got into the small motorboat and settled on the seat when he heard the muffled blast.

"What was that?" the driver wondered aloud.

Sean just shrugged and told him how to get to the Camerillo palazzo.

Venice knew intrigue like a Pieta singer knew music. It was in the bones of the city, it ran like the water that was her blood. The houses of the rich and the powerful had been built with the idea of betrayal and escape as the status quo.

David Gavrilli did not think staying in the old man's home was prudent, not for himself and certainly not for Sean and Lina. And especially not for Cecilie, who was now being hunted by one of Sept Sorian's top contract brothers.

But there was no place else to go. There were the mazes and side entrances, and the hidden room where David had lived for a year before he had felt comfortable enough to take a proper bedroom, but David did not believe the old tricks were good enough to withstand a serious hunter armed with the latest technology. Still, there was no place else he could hide them quickly. Lina was already up there, shivering. Sean had come in by way of the old back entrance that now was part of another apartment building. That had once been part of the palazzo but had been sold off separately and while the space could be divided the entrances all still worked.

Sean paced across the upstairs parlor floor, ignoring the coffee that David had put on the table. "I did it, it's over," Sean muttered. "The Board is dead, the Assembly is gone, the Septs are headless. All of them. It's over. The net is yours, all yours."

David shook his head. "What do you mean?" he asked slowly, enunciating carefully. There was something manic about Sean that worried him, something he had seen hidden in the singer before that had laid dormant all these years. It had frightened David when he first noticed it, though that fear was part of Sean's appeal. But he had never considered that the seductive power of Sean's past could still affect him here, so very far from his own history.

"It was very easy, really. Just a little explosive, we learned how to do it back home. I was training to be a bomber back then, before I got sent here when the factory went. Funny how things come back to you. I would have sworn I'd forgotten how. But you know, it just comes back. And it wasn't hard at all."

"What are you talking about?" David asked.

"The Board," Sean answered. "I blew it up." He came over to David and stroked his shoulder. "For you. As a gift. I know what they've done to you, I know what you wanted. So I did it, that's all."

David jerked around and pulled away from Sean's hand. "You did what?"

"I blew it up," Sean repeated. "I told you that. For you. Just for you."

David stood. Nausea washed over him. He was horrified, shocked. Sean was crazy. David never wanted to see him again.

At the same time he was overwhelmed. Sean had done this for love. He had never been given a gift quite so—unworldly. And so unwelcome.

Absolute Magnitude

David had touched one corpse. The idea of being responsible for hundreds more horrified him. The old man and the Septs and all of them could keep their callous ways. That didn't mean that he had to become part of them, become like them.

He wanted only music. He wanted freedom and beauty and civilization. He wanted exquisite bliss and perfect innocence.

He had wanted love and he had been given love, and love was a harsh and unrelenting thing. Love was the look in Sean's eyes, the hard cold adoration that made him present the Board like a cat presenting a headless mouse as an act of adoration.

Looking at Sean, David wondered if being loved was worth the price. And yet, he couldn't look at Sean without desire or pity, without wanting to protect Sean, and without seeing the essential innocence that lay within the violence in his soul.

He had been right, Sean was like a cat. He was just as guileless and pure, and just as casually cruel. His vengeance was elemental and clean. David had to admit that this quality was one that he cherished about Sean, the otherness that made Sean utterly fascinating.

David could be cruel. He knew that, he'd done it. He could be cold. But he could not remain clean and virtuous with the purity that shone in Sean's eyes when he acted. The violence that was a single clear component of Sean's essence in David was twisted and frightened and crusted in guilt.

"Damn," David said softly. Sean turned away and hid his face. David went to him and put a hand on his shoulder, but didn't look at him. "We're not safe here anymore. Not with the Board blown up. They'll be looking everywhere in the city for you, and for Lina. And Sept Sorian is looking for Cecilie and I have to find her first." He shook his head.

"Where else can we go?" Sean asked. "I'd rather be with you, anyway, no matter what happens."

"I don't plan for you to be dead that soon," David snapped. "I don't plan for any of us to be dead soon and that will happen if we're all together. Damn. Let me think."

"There should be confusion for at least a few hours," Sean offered from his training back home. "The Septs don't know who I am or who set off the bomb. I was masked the whole time. And they won't be able to organize quickly enough to get anything done for hours yet. All the leaders were there."

"There'll be new younger leaders is all," David dismissed the idea. "But since you've been masked the whole time we might have a chance. Maybe this much will work."

He sat down at a secretary so delicate it seemed absurd for it to serve an honest purpose. David pulled out several sheets of wrapped security paper, and one piece of formal ivory vellum. He wrote on the vellum quickly, then set it aside and hand wrote a much longer missive on one sheaf of the security paper. The other sheet he pondered longer and wrote less, but more slowly and carefully. Then he broke the seal on both security blue sheets, unwrapped them and slid them both into a grey photo-block envelope.

He turned to Sean and handed him both documents. "The secure letter is to my family, explaining a certain amount about who you are and my activities. The other is a legal document to formalize our relationship so that no one in my family can deny your rights." He ignored Sean's dazed look and handed him the vellum paper. "This is for you. It is a kiosk account number with the passwords and verifications you'll need to draw funds for you and Lina to get to my

family, along with the address and information to get you past the gates. You'll be safe there. I'd suggest leaving the house now and going to the kiosk station down in the ghetto, then taking a taxi there to an intercity rapido. Buy your tickets on the platform, not at the counter, and use this kiosk account to do it. That way you won't leave a net trail. Or rather, you'll leave a trail for one Michele Turbindo, who should not light any flags except family ones. That means my parents will be waiting for you and you'll be in the uncomfortable situation of having to explain. But at least you'll be safe."

Sean held the papers gingerly. "You mean you're formalizing our relationship? You mean just until you can leave here. You don't mean for real, do you?"

David looked at his hands. He had never considered it before. Even now, he only wanted to protect Sean and Lina, who he saw as his responsibilities. And he wanted to name an heir, any heir that was not his parents. Sean as his heir would give his parents even more grief than David had, and that was good enough.

He had never considered what this might mean to Sean. Now he looked into the utterly guileless blue eyes and he knew that he was truly guilty. He wasn't sure how he felt about Sean, and in the present circumstances he didn't think he could sort out any emotions anyway. It had never occurred to him that Sean might be enough in love with

him to kill for him, or to have intense hope at the thought of formalization.

"I don't know," David said honestly. He wondered why he didn't lie. There was a chance that none of them would survive, and why not make it easier, but he couldn't manage the words. After all the things he had done, the deception he had pulled off, he couldn't lie to Sean about something that meant so much. And that made David confused and angry and strangely contented all at the same time.

"I don't know. We'll see what happens later. Right now I can't think of anything but making us all safe. And I can't leave this city or even the house without the police knowing." He took

Sean's hand. "Later. When we're all past this."

Sean took the papers and left the room, saying nothing. David stood at the top of the stairs. He heard Lina join Sean, heard the door open and then bang shut.

He hoped both of them were masked. They might both be crazy singers, but neither of them was stupid. They could be trusted to mask without him telling them so, David told himself, but without seeing it he didn't feel entirely secure.

He wasn't sure how he felt about running back to his family, and being a coward at that. Not facing them himself, he had still sent Sean and Lina to them for sanctuary, for a kind of protection he couldn't provide.

He should be able to provide it. He resented having to turn back to the Gavrilli power, having to beg them for protection. But he had to take care of his people, he told himself. Even if it meant begging his family. It was the first lesson his grandfather had taught him and his father had reinforced. Part of what made the Gavrilli powerful was that they always took care of their own.

When he had left home he had hated them, he remembered, but over the years in Venice the hatred had grown cold and bits of it had been forgotten or crumbled away. Now he remembered that his parents might be not only helpful to Sean and Lina, but kind as well.



Interface Masque

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There had been the first time his father had taken him out in the net and had shown him the Gavrilli files. He remembered the years when his mother had listened to him practice piano every day and played duets with him.

Not everything he remembered was bad. Maybe they would help his friends more than he had requested. Maybe they would treat Sean like part of the family and not an interloper. Maybe, just barely maybe, he could consider returning to them, coming to his sister's birthday party or to hear his mother sing.

His eyes felt damp and his shoulders hurt as he recalled things that he had so carefully erased. What seemed so hideous, so very repressive years ago now just seemed like people who didn't know what was best but were trying. He didn't know what was truly best for Sean, certainly not for Lina. Perhaps disappearing from the Pieta would be worse for them. Maybe they could just slip back inside and no one would ever suspect them, and they could carry on the lives they had chosen.

He hadn't given them that option. He hadn't even asked. He had decided and dictated and they had followed his orders. He remembered how much he had resented following his father's orders, made with as little consultation. Which, he suddenly perceived, had not been made without consideration. Only his father always thought he knew best, had always acted just the way David realized he was acting now. As an absolute dictator.

He was no different from his father.

The revelation startled him.

And he had to do something about Cecilie. He didn't know where she was and he was afraid that the Sept Sorian brothers might have gotten to her already. And while he was good, and not afraid of much in the virtual world, he wasn't quite ready to try to crack Sept Sorian's security system. At least not yet.

Then he realized that he was planning by fiat again. Deciding that he had to take control, had to make all the decisions, was exactly what had driven him out of the house when he was eighteen. Just the age Cecilie was, and Cecilie didn't particularly like or trust him. In a way it was harder to make decisions about her life than it was for Sean, who would walk into hell for him, who had killed for him.

Cecilie was altogether another matter, and maybe he could practice listening to her before he saw Sean and Lina again. But first he had to find Cecilie. Sean and Lina should be safe—the kiosk account would light up a red flag in the Gavrilli security system everywhere there was an office. The ticket purchase would alert the family and there should be someone coming to meet them. The rapido between Venice and Roma was nonstop sealed. If they made it to the train even Sept Sorian couldn't get to them.

Once they arrived in Rome and were acknowledged under Gavrilli protection there would be nothing Sept Sorian could do. For all the Septs believed that they already did rule the world, they couldn't get past the kind of wall a major family like the Gavrillis had lived behind for generations. It had been written by a hodge-podge of programmers living in different times and from different Septs and from the time before there even were Septs. It wasn't that it was too elegant to break, merely that it was too messy and massive.

Even David Gavrilli hadn't been able to break through, and he had tried. Sean and Lina would be safe, he told himself. He didn't have to worry about them now. One thing at a time.

He had to find Cecilie. She might not even know that Sept Sorian was after her and she might already be dead. No, just one thing at a time. Find her first. Then consider the next step.

He couldn't go in through the house dreambox—there was a flag on it along with his bracelet—but he could use the text environment. Besides, the fact he wasn't flagged in text meant he could remain invisible this way. Text was passive and showed nothing on the net.

So he began the search pattern, looking for the easy trails first. There were none. Cecilie had disappeared from the environment yesterday and had not reappeared in any of her usual configurations. He checked again. He wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one.

Quickly he flipped through the day notices and the public file police reports. No record of anyone like Cecilie found dead or admitted to a hospital. Terrorism at the Board meeting was just coming up on the newsfeed, though, and he paused to read it.

A bomb was detonated today at noon in the middle of the Sept Board Assembly Hall. Over fifty delegates to the current meetings were killed outright. One hundred and six have been injured and are currently awaiting treatment at seven area hospitals. Eight Pieta singers were also injured, one was killed and two are missing, presumed injured or dead. It is believed that the perpetrator gained entrance to the building disguised and masked as a choir member. Police are searching the area for physical evidence and questioning witnesses. As several of the delegates killed and/or injured were foreign nationals, Interpol is acting in cooperation with the local authorities. Anyone who might have any knowledge about this crime are asked to report it to emergency@interpol.gov.



David smiled. Horrified as he was, he couldn't help but be pleased that Sean had pulled it off. He and Lina were listed merely as missing, presumed dead, and not as suspects at all.

He was impressed. Even if he didn't approve of the action, was appalled that it had been done 'for his benefit' he still appreciated a thing done well. Competence was always admirable, and David had never thought of musicians as particularly competent in any other aspect of life.

He didn't have time to dwell on it, either. Hours had passed since noon and Cecilie had been missing all day, so David ignored the rest of the news to resume his search.

He went to all the usual places. The Library, the Mall, nowhere was there a record of Cecilie passing. And there would be a record, there would have to be. If she wasn't in the net there was nothing he could do but sit and wait and hope that she contacted him.

Doing that was truly dreadful. Ten minutes later David was pacing the antique rug that was already worn in the pattern he walked. There had to be something else to do until she reached him. She had to reach him.

He set his mail on alert, so that it would ring when he got a message, and went to his piano. This was the smallest electric keyboard he had in the house. The four others were larger, more

Absolute Magnitude

sophisticated and offered a wider range of options. But this was his favorite for practice, for the half hour of scales and then the hours of music that he had neglected in the recent months. He had already missed a day this week, and probably had missed an entire week of daily exercises since he had begun to try to do something about the Septs.

He didn't feel like practicing at all, but the familiar normalcy of it calmed him. After the scales he started the exercises, and suddenly he was lost in the music. He couldn't think or plan or worry when he was working like this, and time had no meaning. There was only work and music, trying for just a little more resonance here and a softer interpretation there. Different tempos, different phrasing were discarded as David delved deeply into his playing.

He was so lost in the music that at first he didn't hear the buzz indicating that he had new mail. The alert had to go off twice before it penetrated his concentration. When he looked up he glanced at the time and was shocked—hours had dissolved while he had played and it was now nearly evening.

The text of the email was short and careful. "I am currently at the address at the header," Cecilie had written. "But I cannot stay here. They are asking me to leave immediately and I need someplace safe to go."

David felt such vast relief that he forgot that he hadn't made up what to do next. He should send her to his family, he thought. They already had Sean and Lina and it would make sense for everyone to be together. But Sean and Lina had left hours ago and they were either already there or arriving momentarily. He didn't have the rapido schedule available. Besides, he was certain that Cecilie would have to return to Venice anyway and he wanted to talk to her. He could use her advice.

"Meet me at the cafe where we had coffee, where the two women argued," he wrote slowly, considering the words. At least there was nothing Sept Sorian could use if they intercepted the message. He thought about how long it might take her to get there. The address in the header was not local. "Eight," he wrote after some consideration.

That should give her enough time to get in, but left him with more empty hours. In the midst of action he had nothing to do but sit and wait. He was frustrated and furious. Nor did his fury abate when the doorbell rang.

It rang twice and then there was insistent pounding while he went down the stairs. From the incessant noise he knew this was not someone who meant him well. He wondered vaguely whether he should open the door at all, or if doing so would mean that he died. He opened the door anyway.

Two men and a woman stood there. The woman and one of the men flashed credentials. The man was local police and the woman was Interpol. The second man who stood in the background did nothing at all.

Nor was he dressed like the other two, though the difference was subtle. The man without credentials wore a more expensive, better cut suit and his shoes were perfectly shined. Sept Sorian, David thought. A Sept brother could afford clothes well outside a policeman's budget.

David invited them in graciously. The two police officers were polite, thanking him for his offer of coffee and sitting where he

indicated. The Sept brother stayed in the shadows and acknowledged nothing at all.

"We are here to check on your whereabouts today," the local policeman said without preamble. "You know about the bombing at the Board. Where were you?"

David smiled and held out his wrist. "You only have to contact your own department to find out that I never left this house today. If I was anywhere near the Board Hall you would have a record of it, so I can only assume that you are looking for something further."

Inside he was trembling and terrified, but he heard his own words as if they had been spoken by someone calm and urbane. He sounded like someone with nothing at all to hide. Then he realized that the assumption of control and complete lack of anxiety he projected made him sound just like his grandfather.

"We're looking for a Sept sister, Cecilie 8 Sept-Fortune," the woman said. She had a slight accent, perhaps Swiss, David thought. "We have been told that you have had some contact in the net. She's been reported missing and of course we are following up on any missing Sept sisters and brothers, to take them off the casualty lists. So if you have seen her this afternoon, or if perhaps she is here, you would be doing us all a great service in letting us see her and know that she is alive."

David spread his hands, palms up. "I wish I did know that. It would set my mind at ease, too. I did not know she was among the missing. Now I'm worried as well."

The police officers looked at him oddly. Then the Sept Brother spoke for the first time. "We know you received email this afternoon, maybe half an hour ago, from this Cecilie. If you have and you're withholding information you will be charged with perjury and no longer have the luxury of house surveillance. We know you killed Artos Camerillo and now maybe you've killed this girl, too."

"Please, you are welcome to search," he said. "As for my email, it came from a convent outside the city. You wouldn't be looking here if you had

proof that she was alive elsewhere. At least I think not. And so I assume that your concern is making you grasp for straws."

The Sept Brother grunted. The police went through the house while David stayed seated in the library. His main concern was keeping his breathing even and not bolting. This was utterly absurd, and yet he could see the logic to it clearly. He was being set up by Sept Sorian, thought why he couldn't fathom.

He certainly was opposed to the Sept power, but Artos' little organization was no threat to the Sept system, even with the Board blown to pieces. There was something else going on here, something bigger that he didn't have enough information to understand.

His text reader sounded that he had new mail. He got up to read it, knowing full well that both officers and the Sept Brother would join him. He only prayed it wasn't from Cecilie, or Lina or Sean. There was plenty of innocuous email he could have gotten and he prayed without hope that this was one of them.

The header indicated that the mail came from his family compound, but the personal line said nothing about either Sean or Lina. Instead, it was his mother's name and the codeword she had given him when he had been seven years old to authenticate any communication from her. Sean and Lina must have gotten through,



Interface Masque

then, because otherwise there was no way for his family to have gotten his address. He had made certain of that.

He cursed silently. No doubt she would tell him that they had arrived safely and asked his plans and that would be all the Sept Brother would need. The location of the missing Pieta singers would be more than enough to incriminate him.

There was no choice. He opened the mail and watched as the text appeared on the screen. He skimmed the body of the letter twice, not certain that he was reading correctly. This was impossible, was insane.

Your father died at one this afternoon, his mother wrote. He had been ill for several months and the doctors knew it was terminal, but Papa only admitted it to the rest of us six weeks ago. We wanted to get in touch with you, to beg you to come home. You are now the only one who can lead the family. I have never cared for these matters and am barely able to survive as it is—the idea of living without your father is beyond me. Perhaps I shall enter a convent. Living death is at least acceptable there. I have done with this life. Verification in security blue will follow by messenger.

It was unsigned. It didn't need to be signed. The two police officers made sympathetic noises. The Sept Brother regarded him suspiciously, as if he had engineered this turn of events.

David was stunned. His father couldn't die. His father certainly couldn't be dead today. That was too much coincidence.

Or maybe not. Suddenly he understood why Sept Sorian thought he was dangerous. They could get into medical records, and the records of someone as important as his father would be regularly monitored. They knew that his father was dying and that he stood to inherit the Gavrillic fortune and economic power, which could be a threat to them. Especially now, after the bombing with the Board in tatters, they were vulnerable.

Suddenly David wondered if the old man had been killed on the day Sept Sorian found out that his father was dying. How very apt. David was beyond words. It was airtight and yet he was in no position to accuse the Sept—not until he had managed to return home and take over the Gavrillic holdings.

He was going to assume the power he had been raised to wield. Now he knew that he wanted it. He had always wanted it, he realized, and that was really why he had run away. That part of his life was irrevocably over.

"It is good that you are all here and could see this," he said, his voice as calm as if he were enjoying a springtime afternoon. "Now perhaps you will tell your superiors and I will be permitted to return home for my father's funeral. With the bracelet if you insist, but I know that prisoners already convicted are permitted to attend a parent's funeral. Besides, as you can clearly see, my mother is distraught. She isn't able to cope. She needs all of us."

"And your siblings?" the Interpol woman asked.

David shrugged and tapped the side of his head. "Not all quite there, if you understand," he said, knowing full well that she already had a file on his family read into memory. She probably knew more about them than he did at the moment.

"Mmmmm," the Interpol officer said, nodding slightly.

"This is a waste of time," the Sept Brother told them. It was the first time he had acknowledged either of the police authorities. "Either take him in for the murder that we know he committed, or turn him over to us. We've already given you more than enough evidence to convict him."

David closed his eyes. That was the final piece he needed. Sept Sorian, or the Septs in general working through Sorian, wanted him

out of the way. He wondered vaguely whether they would feel the same if he had been more true to the mold, had not participated in disapproved music and hired Sept brothers and sisters to handle the net.

Now it was all so simple, so straightforward, that he couldn't believe that he hadn't realized from the start. He thought he could get away from his family, create himself entirely anew. He thought his father would live twenty more years and that his mother would want to take over the clan. Maybe if that had happened he would have had the life he'd envisioned, being the ultimate disaffected rebel.

The Septs were too powerful to worry about some fringe crazies. David understood only too clearly that was the way they viewed Camerillo. They saw Artos as just another ineffectual nut that threatened them no more than a flea threatened an elephant. But when the flea infected a lion and the lion could hunt the elephant, then the whole game changed.

"I should like to know what evidence you gave," David said coldly. "I have given the police every cooperation in this matter and I would be more than happy to provide additional resources, but I suspect that any evidence given by any Sept against me may not represent the whole truth of the matter. The Gavrillic family will be most happy to assist in any way we can, with whatever resources we have."

His voice sounded like his father's, the controlled threat veiled inside the masterful tone. He sounded so sure of himself, so perfectly composed, that David was not certain that he had spoken the words.

"Unless we are prepared to bring charges, we must permit him to attend the funeral," the local policeman said.

"If you let him go back to them, he'll be untouchable," the Sept brother retorted. "Even we can't get through their security wall."

The Interpol agent seemed mildly amused. "No, and you don't have the authority to demand either access or a prisoner, either." She shrugged. "We do."

David tried not to smile. The Septs had forgotten that there were other authorities in the world, and other forms. That being able to manipulate the net might be the center of power, but that there were other forms of power. For all their expertise in creating and breaking security systems, the Septs didn't have any mechanism to just ask.

Sept Sorian might behave as if they already owned the world, but not everyone in the world was going to lie down and accept that. David enjoyed watching the Sept brother's face smolder and the Interpol agent remain completely oblivious to his anger. Obviously she hadn't thought that Sept Sorian represented the ultimate power in the world.

"We can't charge him," the local man said. "We don't have enough hard evidence. What we do have is merely speculation and circumstantial."

"You have DNA matches, fingerprints, all the physical evidence you could want," the Sept brother muttered.

"Yes," the Interpol officer said. "And that's entirely reasonable given the fact that Mr. Gavrillic admits to having been living here at the time. And the fact that he found the body. There is nothing at all inconsistent with those findings." The local officer hesitated. "In fact, your insistence sometimes makes me wonder whether you would like us to close this matter in some way because of something you expect to gain or want, rather than simple justice. Our records indicate that there was local approval of Mr. Camerillo's activities."

"Are you accusing us?" the Sept brother asked, incredulous.

Absolute Magnitude

The policeman remained perfectly bland. "I am just pointing out the obvious," he said.

Then the Interpol woman snapped open her datalink. She studied it for a moment, touched the pad with her long fingernails and clucked her tongue. "We have no sound reason to hold this person at this time," she said to the local police officer. "Unless you have any compelling reason for holding him, we cannot justify it on the basis of what we have at the moment."

The local policeman's stone expression did not change as he brought out the keytouch, and applied it to the sensitive spots on the bracelet. The surveillance bracelet opened and fell away. The policeman scooped it off the carpet and put it in his pouch along with the key. "You're free to go," he said.

David thanked them, not because he thought it was more than simple justice but because it was good policy. Courtesies cost little and repay a lot, he remembered his mother saying when he was young. He had forgotten that she had taught him that, and that he had never stopped practicing it.

The three left, the Sept brother giving him a poisonous look in the end. David was just as glad that one couldn't keep his feelings completely in check. This way he was armed in advance.

Besides, there was something else David suspected. He had not looked or tried before because he had been afraid and under surveillance and preoccupied with other matters. For the first time since the old man's death, David entered Artos' suite. Artos had had three rooms in the corner of the third story that overlooked the garden and the canal. They were large rooms with high ceilings decorated with ancient plaster work and paintings, as David remembered.

Or at least what he had seen of them. He had only been invited into the outermost room of the suite, the old man's music room. Here were keyboards and drums, guitars and amps and long snaking cords from one piece of equipment to the next. Dark teak shelves lined the walls and these were filled with music, both written and recorded, folios and chapbooks and periodicals with tips on getting more bend on a note. He had only ever glanced in through the doors to the bedroom and the third room, which he had always assumed was a library or dressing room, or something of that nature.

The palazzo was his now, and it was time to enter the old man's rooms and find out if he had left David something extra—something more useful than the house itself. The music room was exactly as he remembered it. Busty nymphs cavorted on the ceiling and dust had settled on the piles of sheet music in the shelves. He ignored this room and went on to the bedroom.

The bedroom was magnificent in the old sense. A canopy bed covered in bottle-green velvet stood on a dias near the wall. Sofas of matching green leather faced each other in front of a fireplace that sported a baroque carved marble mantle-piece. In lighter colors and more delicate fabrics, this style would have suited his mother very well. The marquetry tables scattered throughout the space had been created for some eighteenth century princeling and the golden tones of the woods and the deep greens shimmered and came alive in the deep butter light of late afternoon. David had never thought that the old man was such a sensualist.

Still, the revelations here were personal. And while they were interesting, they had little to do with his immediate quest. He went on to the third room and was shocked.

In the middle stood a dreambox. It had to be unauthorized. David cursed under his breath. He could have come here any time for interface, instead of begging Sean or re-specifying the dreambox in

his own quarters. He slid his finger over the slab steel table. It came away dusty.

He turned away and then he saw what he had been looking for. Against the far wall, hidden by the box lid, was a functional work station with a set of channel receivers. If what he suspected was true...

David sat down and turned on the receivers. A hum filled the space, and then he adjusted each one delicately. Voices. There were voices. He did another set of adjustments and he could hear what they were saying.

"It was Interpol. If it wasn't for them being in on the case we'd have him by now, and it's only because of the Gavrilli connection that Interpol's involved. Any normal murder they'd have just left to the locals," a familiar voice said. David had heard it only an hour earlier. It was the Sept brother who had been there with the police.

"Well, what should we do? We don't have the singers, we don't have the sister, we don't have the Gavrilli. This is absurd," another voice, more authoritative said.

"It's less important than the Board," the familiar voice whined. "We've lost seven brothers, including the three Brother Executives. So why should we bother with something as minor as Gavrilli and friends when there's revenge for the Board to be collected?"

The more refined voice coughed softly. "We can afford to waste one brother on Gavrilli. Besides, I have a feeling this is all related. It's an instinct, I feel it in my gut. My gut has rarely been wrong."

"Like your gut instinct that you will be one of the next Brother Executives?" another voice sneered.

David smiled broadly. He had thought that the legacy to Sept Sorian was too generous. The old man had hated all the Septs, but reserved his particular venom for Sorian. His gift had been a perfect way to introduce tell-tales into the House. He had been very good at those things, Artos Camerillo had, and David was glad he had had the opportunity to study with such a master.

"...so follow him and find the others. He'll lead you to the girl and she'll lead you to the data. But let them think that you've gone, that you've lost interest, that we've called you off."

There was a grunt David took for grudging assent.

It was not just luck, David thought. He had always had this kind of luck, to find out what he needed to know, to find the right people at the right time. It was destiny, his destiny, and he was going to make everything of it. There was some Divine Providence that was as offended by the Septs as he was and was giving him every opportunity to destroy them.

So the Sept brother would be watching him? There were other ways. He went to his text reader and sent a private message to a kiosk box. He was going to stay in the house until it was time to take the morning train to his family, but by then everything should be over.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sister Theresa wore workboots and a heavy canvas apron covered with oil stains from machinery, not the kitchen. Cecilie knew she wouldn't attempt to eat anything Sister Theresa cooked, but the nun did look like she could fix machinery. And work it.

"A dreambox?" Sister Theresa asked. "Well, we do have a very old one. I haven't checked it out in ages, though. It might be junk now. And I can't get to it until I get this mower fixed. You'd think those girls had never seen a riding mower before in their lives."

Interface Masque

Cecilie thought it very likely. She had never seen anything like the contraption that the nun was working on, and she hadn't grown up in the cramped streets of the poorer city neighborhoods. A riding mower indeed. As if there was any grass in Venice.

"So I'll take a look after dinner, how's that?" Sister Theresa stood up and wiped her wrench with a plaid handkerchief.

"Thank you very much Sister," Cecilie answered sincerely. "It will help me get out of your hair sooner, and if you have the thing it doesn't hurt to find out that it's functional."

"I don't know how we came by it," the nun replied. "Before my time. It's really old, even if it is still working. Maybe it was just here when we got the house. Some rich old man left the house to the order, and we figured it was a better environment for the girls with babies than the older building we had on the adjoining farm. This place needed a little work, but it's bigger and has nicer windows. Babies need lots of natural sunlight. So now the old building is our convent and this is our mothers' residence. It makes things much easier."

Cecilie had nothing to say. She went back to the house, which she now knew was the mothers' residence and not the convent building proper, where there was nothing to do for the hour before dinner was ready. Two teenagers in clean cheap clothing set the plain plank tables in the dining room. Others rocked infants and sang songs Cecilie vaguely remember hearing her mother or her grandmother sing. She went outside and stood in the driveway, certain that every time she heard a vehicle pass it was from Sept Sorian coming for her.

Mostly the traffic on the road passed the big farmhouse by. The one time the gate was opened it was for a milk delivery from a nearby farm, young strapping men in work clothes wrestling the raw transport canisters off the platform and through the kitchen door. The sun set and dinner was announced with the laughing peal of a small bell. As a visitor, Cecilie had been set a place near the head table. Somehow the plain white napkin and white china on the bare golden wood of the table managed to look elegant and designed, not merely functional.

The rabbit in rosemary was delicious, just as Bianca had promised. Cecilie smiled at the girl across the room, and Bianca waved back cheerily, but there was no conversation. After the meal was over and the girls were gathering the plates and silverware onto large trays, Sister Theresa collected Cecilie and led her briskly through the silent halls of the convent.

They passed through a small door and went down a flight of stairs into a dark basement. It smelled of damp and root vegetables and the apples that must have been stored here for hundreds of years. Sister Theresa turned on a light and Cecilie saw the shelves that lined the walls from floor to ceiling, all stacked with neatly labeled jars of preserves and pickles.

Up ahead were voices and soft laughter. "The girls' lounge," Sister Theresa told her. "The front part of the basement is finished off."

They passed the door that spilled light and music and went on past odd bits of farm machinery and a huge stack of wood. Several small doors led off, recessed in the endless shelves. "Store rooms," Sister Theresa told her. The nun unclipped a huge ring of keys from her belt and searched before finding the right one. "Now, I'm not sure which room the dreambox is in. Though I think I saw it around Christmas, so it probably is in with the decorations. Here." She opened a door

that desperately needed to be oiled. And, just as the nun had promised, there was an antique dreambox shoved against a wall and covered with loosely packed boxes, each clearly marked for the creche or the tree or the table decorations.

Cecilie felt her hopes smothered in dust. The dreambox was ancient, as advertised, and obviously had not been used in decades. The flat table was being used in place of a storage shelf, and the upper half, suspended from the ceiling, was opaque with dirt. The workings were probably all mucked up, the connectors corroded, the relays and neural interfaces completely worn away.

"Well, get some of these boxes off of here and we'll see how bad it really is," Sister Theresa said in a voice that didn't hold too much hope.

Cecilie started lifting boxes, piling them higher against the adjoining wall. She could feel the contents shift and hoped nothing broke as she reached with her fingertips to balance them on the already staggering heap.

Sister Theresa was already studying the connections on the overhead unit, standing on the flat bed surface and poking around with her hand light and a screwdriver. "Hmmm, this doesn't look too bad," the nun said, surprised. "I'd have thought it was worse.

Well, this basement isn't damp, it's pretty well sealed. But still—I'll bet no one has used this thing since way before my time."

The nun took several fine electronic adjustors out of her worn leather toolbelt. Cecilie recognized the tools from her own required hardware design and maintenance classes and wondered what a nun was doing with a full set. Sister Theresa started testing each of the neural connections the same way Cecilie had been taught, only the nun managed to hold a flashlight under her arm as she worked. Cecilie's Sept sister teachers never expected her to use any less than the finest, the newest, the most advanced hardware. She had never considered how hard it would be to read the status board with only the one half-tone light dangling precipitously over the stacked boxes.

Sister Theresa began to whistle a tune Cecilie only half recognized. "Can I do something?" Cecilie asked. "I mean, maybe I can check the relay panel while you're doing that"

"You can?" Sister Theresa asked, surprised. "Sorry, I'm used to girls who have to be taught how to brush their teeth. I'm not used to skills in a visitor, let alone anything technical. Sure, come on, there should be another flashlight in the toolbox. I've got the big one, but there's a smaller one in there. It's yellow."

Cecilie went through the nun's neatly arranged toolbox. The yellow flashlight was near the top. She had to squeeze into the space at the head of the table and wipe off the view panel with her sleeve before even the additional light would do any good.

She pressed a few of the diagnostic keys. There was no response. "Try turning on the juice," Sister Theresa said from above.

Cecilie felt like an idiot. She traced the connection back to the wall box, where the power had been turned off. The switch looked rusted. It took Cecilie three tries to move it, but even from here and without the extra light she saw the panel blaze and start to run its own start-up test.

She ran the diagnostics carefully, twice, but according to the status bar everything on the table side was in working order. Ancient



Absolute Magnitude

probably rather crude, the thing was still functioning. Maybe it still worked because convents were so clean and careful, or maybe because there was some Deity that looked after her.

"Yeah, it's all working up here," Sister Theresa said. "I had to replace a couple of synapses that had dried out but everything else checks out fine. Looks like you're in business."

Cecilie took a deep breath. The nun had already clambered down from the tabletop and was replacing her tools and belt in the tidy toolbox. Then Sister Theresa left and Cecilie was alone with only the single dim light and the dreambox.

She dusted off the rest of the table with her sleeve, wishing that the nuns hadn't been so perfectly organized not to have left a single rag lying around.

It was after eight. She looked at the box. It was old and even checked out it could die in the middle of interface. That wouldn't kill her, Cecilie told herself. It would be uncomfortable, and perhaps disorient her, but she'd survive. And she wouldn't survive Sept Sorian. Just because she felt so safe, so otherworldly here, was no reason to abandon the future. The nuns were going to throw her out in the morning and give her bed to a girl in a more traditional definition of trouble.

She had to contact David before she ran again and she had to find out what Zizi had left and what the aliens meant. Somehow she had managed to forget all these things while she enjoyed the convent's timeless serenity and connection to the earth. Without further thought she lay down on the table and keyed the telltale under her left hand to lower the top.

The interface looked/felt odd. Colors were greyed and blurry, and Cecilie thought that she would never be able to make out text here. Movement was ragged and she felt more as if she were lurching rather than moving smoothly through the medium, but there was no doubt the interface connected. She was here in the middle of the Mall dressed like a medieval nun in an old-fashioned habit.

She giggled. The default must have been programmed by the previous owner of the house. No real nun would ever wander around in these layers of black robes and heavy veiling. She had worn costumes this constraining, but not for long.

The previous owner presented this image in the net and then left the house to an order—maybe she had wanted to be a nun and had been rejected. Then Cecilie told herself to stop wasting time and being ridiculous. She had no reason to care about the person who had owned this interface and she had plenty of reason to get moving. She checked chrono and it was nearly half-past eight. She wondered how long David would wait for her, and if he'd leave a tell-tale in the lighthouse if he couldn't.

This time she took the traditional route to the deeper levels. She went down the elevator past the sub-basement green. There she whispered "water" to the system, which responded by creating a water icon along with all the other options on the menu. She touched the water icon, a scene of blue curling Japanese waves.

Nothing happened for a moment, and then the elevator doors slid open to the primal datasea. She began to swim. The transition was immediate. She could breathe and move easily here but the full habit and veil weighed her down. She slipped off the veil first, and then the confining wimple and cap before taking off layers of dress and petticoats. From her own dreambox she could have transformed to a mermaid complete with tail, green hair and coral crown, but that option wasn't available now. Too bad, the mermaid swam much faster than the human did.

She swam through the bright green water, sparkling with living representations of packets zipping to their assigned sites, or to someone's call-up or queue. She watched the orange buoys, noting the numbers, as she made for the lighthouse. It had been her lighthouse, but that had been ages ago when she had been a girl apprentice and innocent. In those days she knew that the Septs were right and honorable and dedicated to keeping the net useable and free. The lighthouse could have changed along with everything else.

The swim seemed longer and the water heavier than before, though maybe without the mermaid guise she was just that much slower. Or maybe it seemed slower because she was so scared, so certain that David wouldn't be there and that Sept Sorian would.

They couldn't kill her here. Not really. The old saw about a charge that entered the receiver's brain and fried it was just one more net legend, like the little kid who still wanted postcards or some strange cookie recipe that floated around and showed up at random intervals. But they could trace her if they found her and she had been confident enough that the weird old dreambox was unregistered that she hadn't bounced around the nodes to obscure her origin.

She had been too scared to think straight and so she was here in the clear, though through a box that was old enough that their great grandparents might have used it. If it ever had been registered then the registration would have lapsed ages ago. Had they even registered boxes back then? she wondered, and then realized how absurd the question was. She had better things to worry about than changes in registration laws over the past hundred or so years.

The lighthouse looked different than it had before, even the last time when David had found her here and demanded the banking data from her. That memory seemed a shred of fantasy from another life, one she could hardly remember in the distant past. The lighthouse seemed disheveled somehow, as if it had aged a century since she had seen it last. It was not precisely in disrepair, but seemed on the verge of abandonment.

She went inside and she understood why it was all changed. It had been ransacked. Sept Sorian, or maybe some other Sept, had gone through all her personal files. Things were torn out and open, floating in the shadowed water. Bits glittered like jewels ripped from their settings. Nothing was whole and nothing would make sense.

Cecilie wanted to cry. She wandered through the heap reaching out to a glitter here, a shred there, knowing that nothing would ever put them back whole.

The brothers had done their job and left the lighthouse. Utterly, perfectly still, there was no sign or sense of any other being there. David was not here. Despairing, Cecilie doubted that he had ever come, even at the appointed hour. He had abandoned her like the infosca had forsaken the lighthouse. Or maybe he hadn't been able to come, had been traced and tagged or even killed. That was all possible. Maybe he wasn't completely unreliable but she hadn't expected him to make their appointment in the first place.

So she was surprised when she arrived in the top tower room. David was not there, but there was a pristine zipped folder with her name on it, seals intact lying in the center of the otherwise trashed floor.

She had to try several passwords to open the folder. *Sun* was the one that finally worked, which irritated her. David would have to choose something for himself, not something that would be immediately obvious to her. He was nothing but an arrogant rich kid, right to the end.

Interface Masque

Inside she found instructions, a train reservation and a kiosk account complete with password (lighthouse—how very original) and id numbers all set. The reservation was for a local train, second class, from Padua to Rome. Local. Second class. That wasn't at all secure and he was being a cheap jerk, she thought angrily.

Then she thought again. It made sense. They wouldn't expect her to travel second class, and certainly not on a local. A Sept sister would fly, or at very least have a first class ticket on the rapido. They would never look for her here. This was safer, but she wondered if David had really just been stingy.

There was also the kiosk account and id. She could access it from here, but she didn't want any traces on the record to show that anyone could get in through this level. It would give away too much and so she didn't know how much he had given her.

And Rome. Why would she go to Rome? She'd been to Rome twice, once for a holiday with Julietta and her family, and once as an apprentice with Signora Angelina when the Signora had some specialized work to do. She had found the city overlarge and not charming. She sincerely hoped that David had a plan or a place to hide her, because outside the Sept House in Rome she knew no one.

Still, it was her only option. And it was far better than if David had not come at all, which is what she had expected. She took a minute to memorize the passwords and numbers and the confirmation on the ticket so that she could call it up from the kiosk with all the other arrangements.

She sat in the middle of the lighthouse floor surrounded by debris of her life and tried not to see it. Somewhere in here Zizi had stashed something secret that she would never find. She felt strangely sad, missing the bird that would normally have flown around here as if the level were air and not water, and chattered constantly about what it had found. She missed that stupid program more than she missed most people in her life.

She destroyed the documents, ripping them into component bits and scattering them for reuse. A school of neon pink and yellow fish came and ate the scraps. At least there was no record outside her head of the kiosk account or the train ticket.

Sadly, she descended from the top room of the lighthouse. She would never come back here. There was too much memory in this place, too much she could never restore.

She was so deep in her thoughts that she didn't watch as she exited the structure, and so the Sept Brother took her by surprise. "So you are here," he said, throwing a fine-knotted fishing net around her. "Well, what a catch today."

She struggled against the net, but the more she pushed against it the more deeply entangled she became. The brother was young, probably still an apprentice, and he was laughing.

"Brother Michele said not to bother," he said carelessly. "Is he ever going to be surprised when he finds what I've caught and tagged. And now we'll just be able to trace your registry and collect you tonight. And I'll get all the credit, too."

The net dissolved. She could feel the tracer attached to her in such a way it couldn't be deceived. She couldn't outrun it, couldn't leave the trace. It was worse than the net. It was like being dead.

Only she wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. They would try but at least she was far enough that she could get back to real life before they could come and take her physically. She had to leave immediately and she'd need a place to stay tonight and far from Padua. There was the kiosk account David had left her. She wondered if there were trains running out here late at night, or if service was



limited to heavy-use hours. Padua was not a center of the universe like Venice or Rome or Paris or New York or Tokyo or ten million other cities she could name. She could be stuck for the night, and once Sept Sorian knew she was in Padua she would be too easy to find.

No, she had to do something, but she couldn't think of what. Even if she bounced through a dozen nodes the tracer wouldn't lose her. She couldn't stay in the net all night.

Well, why not? she wondered. If she could stay until just before her train, then they wouldn't be able to trace her easily to Padua until she exited the net and hit the dreambox. Since the interface wasn't registered the header would give only the box address without any of the standard attachment, so they would have to wait until she was ready to leave. By the time the trace could give them her location after she connected to the physical box, they wouldn't be able to get there before she had left. They must assume that she was still in Venice, and tracing this ancient illegal would not be trivial.

It wasn't an elegant solution. It wasn't even a reasonable one. She didn't know what staying all night could do to her. In the Sept House there were limits, and she was beyond all of them now.

She swam aimlessly, thinking of how long she had to remain here, awake and conscious. If she fell asleep the connection in the interface would automatically be broken and the trace would go off. As soon as she realized how long she had to remain awake, she realized how very tired she was. Everything here exhausted her. Swimming was great effort, evading Sept Sorian took too much trouble. It would be worth death to sleep.

Silly, she told herself and tried to shake herself more awake. Maybe if she got out of the level and went somewhere more lively she would manage.

She started paying attention to the buoys and went for the elevator station. There she pressed the elevator icon impatiently. This was not real, there should be an elevator waiting. As soon as she thought that the doors slid open and the menu glittered on the back wall. She looked at her options.

Absolute Magnitude

There were the hangouts and the public parties. She queried for a list and got over fifty thousand topics, half of which were somehow related to sex. She eliminated those, even though many people thought that channel sex was better than the real thing.

She found a group called "Revenge" and pounded the icon with her fist. Revenge was just the way she felt. Running was bad enough. What she really wanted was to get even.

The elevator doors opened on Revenge, which turned out to be rather sparsely decorated with heavy Jacobean-style furniture and a parlor that could have served Catherine De Medici, whose picture hung on the wall. Only three participants were on channel. Two were dressed to match the place, a woman in wide skirts and gloves and a man in a brocade frock coat with long curls. Cecilie thought they were probably the bots that kept the place going when there was no one around. In the corner sat another figure not dressed in period at all, studying a book.

She walked up to him. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

The figure looked up at her. She couldn't tell if the being was male or female. It had an androgynous look that changed depending on the angle and the light. "A book of poisons," the androgen said softly in a voice that was as indeterminate as its face. Indeterminate, but not sexless, Cecilie thought. Whichever gender the being was, it was seductive. Being difficult to identify made the individual more attractive and more disturbing.

"You know, poison is rarely used these days, and very often not used well at all," the androgen went on. "Think of de Medici. She is my goddess, the ultimate poisoner. It is said that she is the inventor of the poison ring. She used everything as a medium of death—cosmetics, a book, a cross, a pair of gloves. The gloves were most subtle. And nothing ever proved of course. Today we are so crass. We kill, we trace in the net, but we lack elegance and creativity. Revenge is an art form more than a simple act of fury. People don't understand that any more, and so the art has been lost. It is not about death, it is about making your enemy suffer."

The dark face with the angel eyes smiled beatifically, and Cecilie shuddered. Revenge was art indeed. She wondered what the monitor at Sept Sorian thought on experiencing it at once remove through the trace.

And then she smiled. The tracer could see whatever she saw, hear whatever she heard. It could not see what she thought or planned or what she knew. No, it could only pick up what was out there to be seen.

Revenge was indeed an art and she knew what she was going to do. It was dangerous and she was afraid, but fear was less important than fury. She knew hate, and she was willing to sacrifice whatever was necessary on its altar.

She was anxious to go. The stranger had turned back to the book, ignoring her. She returned to the elevator and pressed the icon for the Library. This time she knew exactly what she was about.

She ignored the main reading room altogether and headed directly for the basement. She flung open doors one after the other until she found what she was looking for.

Behind this door lay insanity. Images crossed each other out of context, everything disheveled and beyond recognition. Here was the antithesis of all order, that which defied categorization. On top of the images were the twisted images and nauseating angles, things that disregarded all human sensibility.

Cecilie stepped into the room. Data flowed around her, tumbling inchoate, moving crazy. Even braced for the disorientation it sickened

her. She closed her eyes and blotted out the madness around her. And she smiled grimly, knowing that whoever watched the other end of the tracer didn't have that luxury. Whoever was on the other end was receiving the full live feed and couldn't look away. Revenge was art.

She stayed in the room with her eyes closed for what seemed like eternity, and then she waited for a second eternity after that before she exited. She called up the chrono and the readout appeared in the lower right side of her vision in blue superimposed on the cool basement wall. There were hours left to go. She set a limit on the timer to jolt her when it was time for her to return to the convent and leave Padua. This was not a thing the tracer could read. It could only follow her and see what she saw. It could not know that she had set an internal alarm in her mind.

Grimly she went on to the next archive, and then the one after that. Each had its own brand of dementia, its own inhuman twist to human life and a human world. Each curled the net around itself in a different flavor of anomaly. As soon as there was any hope of sense Cecilie moved on.

Each alien archive threatened Cecilie's grasp on reality just a little bit more. Though she tried to tear herself out of the strangely contorted information that made up the alien catalog, she could not completely disassociate from it. Every movement jarred her sense of center, her stability. Finally she could not be sure she felt floor under her feet, that there would be calm and emptiness in the corridor, that the Library had not dissolved into some melted conglomeration that had once been knowledge but no longer made any sense whatever.

She lost track of herself. She no longer existed in this jumbled psychosis. She would have lost herself completely in the sensory lunacy had not her alarm indicated it was time to go. Finally she staggered out of the last room. Keeping her eyes closed had not been enough and she was so badly disoriented that she could barely get back to the dreambox.

The tracer was with her until she broke the neural connection with the box, but her train left in half an hour and while they could get here quickly enough if the person on the other end could report easily, Cecilie had an idea that he would waste that much time trying to disconnect himself and get to his superiors. By which time she would be on her way to Rome. With a second class ticket on the local. And they would never find her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

David waited at the platform in Rome for the local to arrive from Padua. He didn't know if she was on it; he hadn't had the time to access the account and double check. Besides, that would be dangerous. He had arrived over an hour ago and had spent the time drinking coffee in the waiting room and trying to avoid the beggar girls with dolls swaddled to resemble real infants. He had forgotten this part of Rome, though he had not known it intimately. A Gavrilli, he had always traveled privately, been flown or driven wherever he wanted to go. He had only been to the train station twice before, and had not remembered it as this unpleasant.

He found himself enjoying the irritation. If beggars and pickpockets could worry him then he was in a very good state. Gavrilli Security/Transport should arrive just as Cecilie's train was due in, and then they'd be safe. Sept Sorian might be stronger in Venice and on the net, but he had no doubt that they could not penetrate the defenses of his family home.

Interface Masque

They were almost there. Almost. Safety was so close he could taste it, but the danger was not over yet. He paced on the platform. The train was due in two minutes and the local was as reliable as the rapido.

He saw a man and a woman in Gavril Security uniforms, crisply tailored and dark authoritative red and he felt just a touch easier. They appeared unarmed but David knew better. They waited for the train he had said he was arriving on with a friend. These two must be newer members of the security team since they didn't know him on sight.

Though maybe even someone who'd known him at eighteen wouldn't recognize him. He thought he looked the same, but he had both more assurance and more apprehension. His style had changed in the years up north and now his clothes were Venetian, more subtle and fashionable than was usual in a Roman crowd. He had forgotten.

The train appeared in the distance, slowing as it came to the station. David was anxious although he could think of no reason anything should be wrong. Cecilie should be fine and exit from one of the red painted second class cars in a minute. He hoped she wasn't too angry about him booking second class, but he had thought that it would be harder to find her in the more crowded compartments.

The train slid to a smooth halt. Doors opened and people poured out. Some struggled with luggage and others gripped small childrens' hands tightly. Business travelers in conservative suits carried leather briefcases and students were festooned with backpacks and books but there was no Cecilie.

He waited. The crowd on the platform subsided and now there were only the stragglers, the ones who couldn't reach their luggage easily or who hadn't wanted to endure the crush.

A young woman with Cecilie's mass of bright red hair came off the train three cars away. She walked slowly as if she were very old and she carried no luggage. He ran up to her and took her elbow. She flinched.

"Come on, the security guards are at the end of the platform and then we're safe. You're out of it. You're okay now. It's all over." He tried to be comforting but she didn't acknowledge him.

Then he looked at her face. Her eyes were blank and dull, as if she had stared into hell and would never see anything else again. Her face was slack, emotionless. All the passion was used up, inward, that had buffered her from whatever had rendered her this lifeless. It had not been enough.

This was not the Cecilie he had known. That person had died, murdered in the night. He wondered if her brain was permanently damaged, if she was going to be like this forever. And he wondered what had left her so scarred.

Then she turned to him and smiled. That smile was more frightening than the blankness. It was filled with cruelty and triumph, and he wasn't certain if the cruelty wasn't aimed at herself.

"Revenge is an art," she said. "I always thought that what I did best was collect data. I was wrong. You know, David, you always were so superior to me because you were an artist and I was merely a Sept sister net.ninja. But you're wrong. I'm an artist too."

They said nothing on the short hop back to the Gavril compound. The security team was efficient and not too familiar, and they wore black armbands to indicate the head of the household had died. They had brought armbands for David and Cecilie, as if it was unthinkable that anyone connected with the family would be without some overt symbol of mourning.

As they hovered over the landing pad, David fought a flood of emotion. He was back here now, behind the walls and the electronic guards, with all the expectations and roles he had despised. The last time he had seen the house he had only desired never to see it again.

Now it stood ominous in the brightness of the afternoon, deceptively calm among the terraces and flowering trees and the tiled fountain that stood before the door. Silent, waiting, all that it had once symbolized threatened to swallow him whole. He looked back at it and felt his whole youth screaming at him to run. He had been an idiot to return.

But he was now the master here, he reminded himself. The house could no longer prevent him from doing what he wanted, it was merely one more resource in his portfolio, and a minor one at that.

Once upon a time he had wanted to fight the Septs and now he had the power to do it. Money, expertise, influence were his for the asking. He had earned it and now he could wield it as he desired.

He was certain he could stop Sept Sorian cold. The bully boys could fight a bunch of nobodies who had only music and desire as



weapons. They had never been challenged by the head of one of the great mercantile houses in the world.

He motioned to his escort to pull the vehicle to the side, and he got out to walk the last few hundred meters. The flowering trees were not in bloom and the giant cypress stood guard over all. The air was still as David breathed in the scent of the gardens. He walked slowly, approaching the silent house with the black wreath on the door reluctantly but inexorably. He could not avoid his fate any more than the fly being seduced into the spider web.

Ghosts remained. They fluttered behind the closed curtains, the shadowed door. The ghost that haunted him most was his own, his memories of powerlessness and restraint, the family that had torn him from everything he had enjoyed and done well to play Crown Prince of the Empire. With the expectation that his father would live for many years and that he would be an errand boy until he was a grandfather himself, he had felt suffocated.

Absolute Magnitude

Why hadn't anyone ever told him that his father was sick? That his father wanted to ensure the dynasty when his mother really had little interest in the day-to-day workings of the Gavrilli concerns and his sister was not capable. From the time he had been twelve he had hated his father with an intensity reserved for those deeply loved. Now he wished that he had known, that someone had told him, that he could have told his father that he understood.

Or maybe at fifteen, or eighteen, he wouldn't have understood. Without the old man, without the music, he might never have learned. As he walked toward the house he was surprised to find that he was weeping. He mourned the fact that he had never been able to come home before and reconcile and recognize exactly why his father had made his life so harsh.

That was then. This was now. The cavernous door opened and his mother stood, a frail figure alone, dressed in black, framed in the oversized foyer. He went to her and she hugged him hard, wordlessly. Everything was so different from the way he had imagined it, and yet so utterly familiar that he could have seen it a hundred times.

"Your sister is resting," his mother said softly. "It's been very hard on her."

David only nodded, remembering the overwhelming jealousy he had had. His sister, who could never function fully in the hierarchy of the family, had always been their father's favorite. She had had all the love and attention he had wanted, while he thought there was nothing for him but disapproval. And now that he had some glimpse of why decisions had been made it was all too late. Still, he did not want to see Lucia immediately. Better that she get her rest and let him assimilate his ghosts alone. No reason she had to pay for his emotional blunders and she would never understand anyway. She was not capable of understanding, but she was fully able to express anger and recrimination and love. He realized that he very much wanted the latter.

"My friends?" he asked when the embrace was over.

His mother nodded. "They are waiting for you. But I wanted to see you alone first." She hesitated. "And the friend you brought with you?"

"Cecilie Sept-Fortune," he answered quickly. "She's had some trouble recently."

His mother nodded but said nothing. She turned and led them into the family parlor, where Lina and Sean waited. They both sat formally on straight back chairs and wore dark clothing. Sean wore full black as an acknowledged member of the family.

"So, finally, we're all here together," David said heavily.

"I want to get some rest," his mother said, excusing herself. David nodded, certain merely that she wanted to leave them alone. He was just as glad of it.

"What happened?" Sean asked.

"I don't know," David said. "Cecilie will have to tell us."

Cecilie told them about leading Sept Sorian through the alien archives. Her words were spare and lurched forward, as if she couldn't encompass the entirety at once. "And so," she concluded, "maybe one of them is mad, or maybe I am. Or maybe they're on the way here now. But revenge is an art. And if I drove one of them mad, then I've proven something. I've shown them the power." And she began to laugh, her tone tinged with hysteria.

Lina patted Cecilie's hand. "We'll have to find out just how much destruction you and Sean together caused," the singer said softly. "But I would think that the heart is torn out now. The Sept Board will try to reassemble, but they must be terribly weakened. And even if you

didn't drive anyone mad, Cecilie, not even yourself, you have forced them to publicly confront something much more difficult. There are aliens. We could ignore anomalies in the Mall, and debate whether or not we were alone in the universe. The fact is that now we know and no one can retreat from that knowledge. That is a much greater revenge than insanity. Everything will have to be different now. We know they are here. Somehow we will have to deal with them, learn to communicate, learn to exchange information. We will need to or we will have to destroy them. There is nothing else. We aren't capable of simply recognizing that we can't possibly communicate and let each other go. I wonder if they feel the same way?"

"What?" Cecilie asked from within her daze.

"They're here because they can't ignore the fact that we exist," Lina said. "They can't simply pass on the idea that we can't understand each other and let it go at that. They also need to try to understand, somehow. It's all like music. Even if you try to eliminate jazz, it is still here. It can't die, it can only transform itself. But the things that we are not permitted to hear seep into the cracks in our consciousness and we can't escape them. Maybe music is information, I don't know. Certainly they behave the same way. Neither can be suppressed, they both are alive and recreate themselves everywhere. Maybe it is part of our nature, or maybe it is true everywhere. I wonder what the aliens think of that, if they find that music and information are almost impossible to contain?"

David blinked. He had thought of Lina as no more than a singer. Now he understood why Sean had approached her.

"We're safe now," David said. "Sept Sorian, none of the Septs can do anything to us here. So I suggest that we find out and evaluate exactly what kind of damage Sean and Cecilie have done. That's the first step. Then we'll take it farther."

"Why don't you stay with your family?" Lina suggested. "For any of the public information, I can handle a kiosk account. Sean and I can pull together the public picture. And later on either you or Cecilie, if she is able to, can go in and look at the Septs from the inside. But she needs to rest now and you should look in on your sister."

Lina stood as if it were all arranged. Sean looked at David with a question in his face. David nodded. Lina was right, they could do that. And Sean would enjoy seeing just what havoc he had created.

Lina took Cecilie by the hand. "Come on, there's a room made up for you and a wonderful tub. You'll have a hot bath and then a good long sleep and you'll feel much better."

David doubted that, but let Lina lead Cecilie away. Sean turned back and studied David for a moment. "You'll be all right?" he asked. "You won't do anything stupid?"

David sighed and shook his head. "As if you're the one to ask," he said, but there was only admiration and warmth in the statement.

He was alone. In the Gavrilli house he was blessedly alone for the first time. The family parlor was just as he remembered it, but he liked it better. Maybe after all the silk and heavy water colors of Venice, he found the restrained design and muted palette restful. Things were less ornate by style, permitting the contrast of materials—of marble and aluminum, steel and tile to provide the interest.

He had been wrong about a lot of family things, he thought. Maybe he was more wrong than he had known.

He left the parlor and went to his own suite, not because he wanted to revisit memories but because his dreambox was there. Or should be there, if it hadn't been ripped out and discarded when he had left.

His whole suite was exactly as he had left it. The dark reddish brown marble set off the blond wood furniture throughout.

Interface Masque

Everything was simple and clean the way he liked it, the way he had forgotten in the years in Venice where everything was decorated, adorned and embellished. Sean's things had been unpacked into his closets, which startled him at first, and then silently reminded him that his family had taken his documents to be true in spirit. Strangely, David realized that he was pleased.

His old dreambox was in the last room in an alcove in his study. He decided that if he stayed he wanted to keep these same rooms. He didn't want to move to his parent's wing, which in any case had been decorated by his mother and was far too pink and white for his liking.

The dreambox was exactly where it had always stood, dusted and polished and even recently inspected. There was a date on the inspection panel that was only a week old. Maybe they were expecting him home, or maybe it had just become part of routine maintenance, he didn't know, but he was glad to have this interface again.

He had no intention of waiting until Sean and Lina gathered a report. He had to know, now, precisely what effect Cecilie's strategy had had on Sept Sorian—and Sept Fortune.

This time he did not don his sun mask inside. He went with a harlequin, utterly indistinguishable except that it had come from the best of the Venetian maskmakers and indicated that he knew what he was doing. He could not interface directly into the Library so he took a more circuitous route, but ended up in the main reading room.

It was mobbed as he had never seen it before. He blended into the background, trying to appear as a junior Sept brother who was merely there to observe and learn. There were surely enough of them, it seemed. If this had been a physical space they wouldn't have all fit.

"They've been gone for an hour at least," someone near him complained. "It doesn't take that long to go to the basement."

"It isn't that long, and they had to find the aliens," someone else replied.

David realized that he had no way of telling people apart, not by Sept or gender.

"I still think we should have had a joint committee go," the original speaker grouched. "Sept Sorian has been just a little too important lately, you know? Pushing us all around as if they were in charge all the time. I mean, what about that Sept sister who disappeared? The one who they said went renegade and all? Why shouldn't she get protection and to bring her case before the Board? Where does Sept Sorian get the idea they have the right to decide what's good for all of us?"

"Because there isn't any Board," the second speaker said. "And with so many senior people dead or in the hospital, and the danger to all of us, someone had to be in charge. So Sept Sorian showed up and did the work, and if they're taking the brunt of the hits now we have to support them. Or else there wouldn't even be a Sept system any more. We'd all be dead."

A third person masked as a red harlequin chimed in. "No, we wouldn't all be dead. We'd be restructured some, and probably more consolidated, which was the whole point, right? We would all be standing around here now just like this, but we'd have some say about was going on. Do you really believe all that alien stuff?"

The others in the general vicinity shrugged. "It doesn't really matter, does it? Aliens are not responsible for the bomb in the Board room, and that's what's important now. Not this damn idiocy." This speaker had a firm voice and some charisma. David tried to take note. "Sept Sorian suffered the loss of two brothers and the want Sept Fortune to pay. Sept Fortune suffered the loss of a sister, who was

protecting herself against Sept Sorian. If this is what we've come to then we're pretty sorry."

"But didn't she set the bomb?" someone else asked.

"Who knows?" the firm speaker said. "That's what Sept Sorian says, but since when have they become the single arbiters of truth? No, they just want us all to fall into line, do what they say because they want to be on the top of the heap. And they're using this crisis to do that."

"You think they caused it for their own benefit?" someone said thoughtfully.

David jumped in immediately. "It makes some sense," he volunteered.

"More than some sense," the leader agreed heartily. "After all, how long have they been going around trying to run everything and all of us? Trying to tell us which contracts we could accept and which we couldn't? That we weren't allowed to work for any corporate sponsors anymore without paying them a commission, which cut revenues pretty badly? And whose idea was this meeting, for us to consolidate firmly under one single leadership, so that we could combine our strengths?"

"Well, it was Sept Sorian's idea," the first speaker said. "We all know that. I thought it was weird that they picked a city where there wasn't one of their larger or stronger houses."

"They never liked the sister Septs," an unmasked woman volunteered. Her net face was young and beautiful but her voice carried the authority of experience. "Especially Sept Fortune. We were told more than once to concentrate on the work that was our place, not what we wanted to do. Or the higher paying contracts we were offered. Frankly, they tried to bully us and we didn't want to listen. So they attacked us through one of our newest members. Very brotherly."

David thought that this might be Signora Tima. Cecilie had said she was fearless. He wasn't sure that rash wouldn't be a better word to describe her. In any case, she was not in the least subtle. David wondered if she had ever really studied Machiavelli, and what benefit that study had been to her.

As they talked David noticed that the Library changed. It was subtle at



Absolute Magnitude

first, like the anomaly had been. The heavily burlled paneling seemed to soften and drift, the deep gloss of brass became shiny and cheaper. Then the others caught it and everyone became very quiet as the Library lost the extra layers of solidity and fine detail that marked it as Sept more clearly than any designation.

The illusion of walls and tables, reading lights and leather chairs wavered. Everything became gossamer and insubstantial, the plan of the Library and not the place itself.

"Go back to the real world," a voice proclaimed. "The Library is contaminated and condemned. We are ridding it of the pestilence now."

Anger rippled through the crowd. The speaker had stood by the door, looking much more concrete than the shreds of Library that remained. The speaker removed a black hawk-nosed mask, though it was not by face that David recognized him. Rather it was the arrogance and the way he behaved. Sept Sorian. And probably a senior brother.

"What gives you the right?" an older woman challenged him. Small and determined, she marched through the crowd and confronted the brother. She had been the first leader in the discussion, not the second, and David realized he had been wrong. This woman who was a cross between a grandmother and a witch was Signora Tima, and he had no doubt that she could be as subtle as she was forthright. Something about her reminded him of Catherine de Medici, the Florentine girl who split and terrorized all of France. "The Library has always belonged to all of us. Not to you, not to any single Sept or generation. You have no right to destroy it."

The brother shrugged. "This place is infested. There are aliens here digging in to the basement levels, building archives with an architecture that will drive any human insane. You've been fortunate to avoid this reality. We at Sept Sorian have more experience, due to your Sept sister. Who you're protecting even now. Believe me, we know that Sept Fortune is obstructionist to our combined benefits. You have always stood with those few sorry Septs promoting forbidden music, teaching apprentices to respect authority other than what is properly constituted among us. You have been a problem."

A deep hush fell over the group as the walls started to disappear. The furniture was already gone. The Library was almost entirely erased already; at this point protest was merely impotent fury.

But Signora Tima did not explode. There was no anger in her, only the wisdom of the adult watching children rip apart a favorite toy. "No, we have not been a problem. You have been a problem," she said. There was no defiance in her tone, no flight of inspiring oratory to her style. There was only a bare discussion of the facts. "You yourself are not old enough to remember what things were like once, when the choirs played any music they liked and the Septs were all independent. It was Sept Sorian and a few cohorts who pushed through the idea of change. Change is good, people said. Change or die. So we changed, and we left ethics and competition and honest work behind. When I was a young apprentice, the function of the Board was to mediate disputes between Septs, not to take over the net. No, Brother, you have tried to create some new and different world and unless you eliminate all of us you can't. You'll tear down this Library, which is more important and was more substantial than the Board, and you'll dissolve any hope of unity we ever had."

"And you can't win any more. Septs fighting Septs. You won't have time for the rest of the world. You'll have to watch your traces too much. Your dreams are all gone and we didn't destroy them. You did. You went too far, though I don't suppose your Sept believes in classical education so I don't think you would understand that you are guilty of hubris. Which is more than just pride in classical Greek; it means challenging the

gods. You and yours are no longer welcome in any house of Sept Fortune."

Then quickly, as if she were trying to catch up with the rest of the Library, Signora Tima dissolved into nothingness.

David did not need to listen to any more of their talk. He wondered where the aliens would go now, whether they would remain at all, or even knew what was happening to them. Thinking of the aliens made him sad. They maybe could have learned somehow to communicate, some day. And the information they could have shared then... Just knowing there were other people out there somewhere was important. David wished they'd known where the aliens were from, how far away they were. And if they could ever be more than collectors and archivists to each other.

None of that mattered now. Sept Sorian was set on barring aliens from the net and Sept Fortune would oppose them and the power lines would be drawn. The Septs would fight each other and the Gavrilli clan would sit back and pick up the business. It would be easy, maybe too easy. And he could get everything he had ever hoped for. Only the victory tasted hollow.

One more death. They had just buried David's father a week before. The ceremony had been beautiful, moving. The music provided by Lina and Sean had been breathtaking and had brought everyone near tears.

It had been a good funeral, Cecilie thought. She was no connoisseur of the form, but she recognized the stately presence of death and the majesty of loss inherent in the ceremony. The public service would come later. This funeral had been only for those who mourned a man, not a symbol.

David had stayed with his mother and sister throughout. That was only proper. Sean was included in the family group, but placed behind David in the order of things and not in the row of the principal mourners. That, too, was proper. Everything was ordered and choreographed and people moved in their assigned places.

Cecilie had stayed well in the back with Lina. They had felt like interlopers, and yet it would be impolite not to attend. So they agreed they were there for David's sake, which made sense in some strange way.

The time before the funeral and the week since Cecilie had spent healing. The shock and horror she had absorbed during her revenge was muted by days wandering the compound gardens, swimming, playing tennis in the sunlight, all the helpful and restorative things the therapists prescribed. She listened only to light music in the evenings and spent a lot of time outdoors where nature helped her gain some balance and sense of order.

She was not permitted back in the net, not even through a kiosk account to go to the Mall. When the therapists agreed that a shopping trip would be a good outing, Cecilie went with Lina and two women guards in plain clothes into Rome. There they went to the finest stores and tried on expensive outfits that they could afford only because the Gavrilli account had been opened to them. Cecilie hadn't planned to buy anything. "But you weren't able to pack anything," Lina pointed out. "At least buy some nice lingerie and a change of clothes. Too much washing and those things will be rags soon."

Lina was right. So Cecilie used the account and bought a pile of lace and silk underthings, several dresses and a few casual outfits. Lina bought lipstick and a fancy dress for performances as well as everyday clothes. The guards never looked at the goods for sale at all.

She was better, they all agreed. Not the way she had been before, but better. Recovering. That level of shock was not absorbed quickly, and some might not be absorbed at all. There was some talk of memory

Interface Masque

surgery, to remove the worst of it, but Cecilie refused permission. They were her memories, after all, her scars. She had earned them.

So the days followed each other with mind-numbing sameness, dull and wholesome and unproductive. Privately Cecilie thought she had far too much time doing nothing. If she had some project, something to occupy her mind, she would have little opportunity to dwell on the insanity that played around the edges of her consciousness. But the therapists had said that she wasn't permitted back to the net and there was nothing else she could do. She hadn't been trained or fit for anything else at all.

David gave her a job doing something with shipping reports, but she couldn't make sense of it and quit less than a day later. "We're just waiting, all of us," David had said when she had told him that she didn't want a charity job that was completely useless. "When the Septs begin fighting among themselves, we'll be able to go in and keep them from tearing the net to pieces. And then we'll emerge in exactly the position Sept Sorian had envisioned, only we'll do it right."

She had heard his words but she doubted him. Sept Sorian thought that they could do it right once, and they were wrong. She was also proud of what David had told her about what Signora Tima had said to the Sept Sorian brother when the Library had disappeared. Signora Tima had not taught her ethics for nothing. Everything that had twisted when she had become a full member of the Sept had unravelled, and she believed again what she had believed as a girl. Sept Fortune was there to serve those who could not navigate by themselves. They were there to provide security for those who needed it, they were there to keep the net free. Not make it a fiefdom for Sept Sorian.

She had dressed for dinner slowly that evening, watching herself transformed in the mirror. She pulled her unruly hair back severely and pinned it firmly in place. The girl, the fugitive, the convalescent disappeared. In her place emerged a woman of strength and reserve, determination and power.

The letter had changed everything, and it seemed to Cecilie the change appeared on her face, in her hair, in the way her formidably tailored dress armored her figure. She was already the woman they had invited home, not the rebellious girl who had run away. Still, she was worried about telling David and the others.

"I have to go back to Venice," she said that evening. She had waited until after the dinner dishes were cleared and David's mother and sister retreated to their own misery. Coffee and brandy was served in the library, a place far more forbidding than the Sept Library that was now a ghost in the net.

"Why?" David asked, putting down his espresso cup. "You're part of the new world here. You can create anything now. Why go back?"

"Because," she said, and she stopped. She knew she couldn't share the contents of the blue-paper letter she had received from Signora Tima that afternoon. The letter had shaken her deeply. Signora Tima had not only found her and was inviting her home, but was also promising to make Cecilie her protégée to take over Sept Fortune. In the coming war between the Septs, Signora Tima and Signora Angelina had decided that Cecilie was the most likely leader to counter Sept Sorian, and they had decided that she had to begin a new phase of training immediately.

Ordinarily we would have waited until you had made journeyman to tell you what our plans were, and take you into our confidence, the note had read. You were always our choice of your generation, which is why

we made things so difficult for you. No doubt you understand now that everything we have done in your special education was to prepare you for the role we have chosen you to play. Cecilie 8 Sept-Fortune, the Elder Sisters and Signoriae decided more than five years ago that you would be groomed to become the Signora Executive of the Sept. That was before we were threatened by Sept Sorian. Now that we are fighting for our survival it is necessary to begin your instruction in the art of diplomacy and negotiated combat far earlier than anticipated. You are expected immediately.

It had been signed by both Signora Tima and Signora Angelina. Cecilie was thrown by the implications in that letter. She had never desired this role, and wasn't certain even now if she wanted to accept the decision of the Signoriae.

But Sept Fortune had the resources to win the coming conflict, and Cecilie knew that she wasn't afraid of a fight. Nor was she so innocent that she could not win against a treacherous enemy. She was a Venetian, after all, trained in Venice and twisted to the purpose of her Sept.

Were there any other options, anyway?

She looked at David Gavrilli. He had changed since she had first met him playing jazz. Now he wore the silk suits he had eschewed in Venice, the handmade shoes, the buffed nails. Everything about him was perfect, verged to take over the world.

He was no different than the brothers in Sept Sorian.

She had never entirely trusted David Gavrilli, and now she understood why. He had been trained to authority and he wanted it. No matter how badly he denied the fact, he had been raised to power and it was in him deep as his DNA and he couldn't resist it.

She could. She wanted nothing more than to return to her old life. Only that life was gone, and Cecilie realized that she knew more about the one that was coming than most. She had lived here, she had seen them all up close and knew how they thought. If she did not accept the mantle of authority, someone else would.

The power was there for her just as it was for David. He was Gavrilli. She was Sept Fortune. Like

David Gavrilli, she was also the heir to great resources and power, and like Gavrilli she had been prepared all her life to wield them. They were no different, she realized. She and David were precisely the same in far too many ways, and that made her sad. But she could not escape that fact any more than David Gavrilli could escape being Gavrilli.

Now she had to tell that to David. He had used her, she knew, but he had also tried to protect her. And he had given her jazz, the freedom of mind that would make her stronger and more creative than any member of Sept Sorian could ever imagine.

She closed her eyes and composed her words carefully. "Because I have been called back to Sept Fortune," she said quietly. "What you need to fight is a particular attitude among the Septs in Sorian's camp, and I have just been drafted by the opposition. I will be leaving on the evening rapido."

David studied her thoughtfully, then smiled sadly. "I had hoped you would join us," he said. "But perhaps it will be a very different future: when there is the possibility of a Sept bringing down the Septs. We've been allies before. I hope we can remain allies in the future."

Cecilie shrugged. "We don't know what the future will bring," she said. David seemed to accept this, but she realized that she wanted to give him something more. Some hope, a hand held out after all they'd done.



Absokute Magnitude

Now that she was leaving, she doubted that she would ever see him again, except perhaps for the opposite side of a negotiating table.

"Don't stop playing," she said. "And I'll never stop listening to jazz. It will always be part of Sept Fortune, and it will always be part of you. So there will always be a reason to talk."

David smiled and held out his hand. She took it firmly, then kissed him on both cheeks goodbye.

The world wakes up to syncopated sunlight. Music shimmers between dawn and daylight, the sad sad time to go to sleep and the hope of a new day. They come out to sit and sing and play on the bridges and in the squares, students and young players trying an improvisation or a long slow sorry line of the blues. Their teachers have already staggered to their beds unimpressed with what the night has brought.

Night lingers in the smell of old coffee and the hurting strains of dirty delta blues, whisky voices and raw desire. But it is daylight and time for the ordered music of the light. So the players pack up their instruments, their keyboards and saxophones and drums and guitars, their horns, their basses, their jugs of cheap wine, and go home until the shadows grow long again.

They go back to the large schools where they wear the sky blue robes of the Pieta and study Mozart and Stravinsky and rock and jazz. In their sacred calling they know that they keep the city, they keep the minds of the Septs and the world in the music.



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